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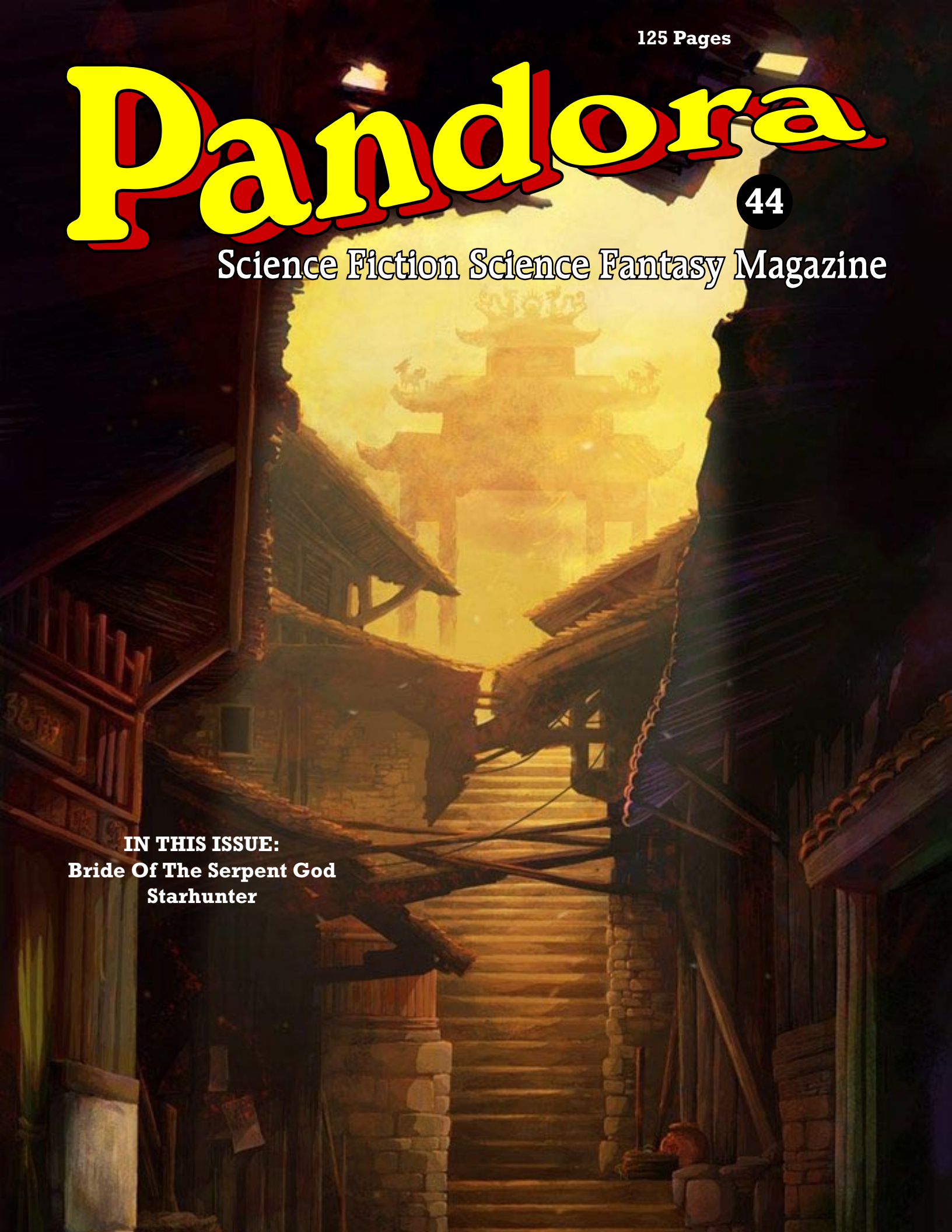

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Starhunter

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Bride of the Serpent God

I. - Treachery

KI-GOR placed a plump, scarlet berry in his mouth, and munched slowly, with much satisfaction. He lay in the cool shade of a flowering shrub, completely relaxed, obviously at peace with the world and pleased with life in general. The only sounds were the soft hum of insects drawn by the heavy scent of flowers and the lulling murmur of the broad river which flowed a scant twenty paces from where Ki-Gor rested.

Helene, his mate, vibrantly young and alive, stood beside Ki-Gor. She looked down at her lounging husband and feigning disapproval, she placed hands on hips and sighed with disgust.

"You lazy thing, Ki-Gor. Are you going to lie there all day eating berries?" she asked, pouting lips as red and much more inviting than the fruit which had occupied her Jungle Lord the past half hour.

The bronzed giant stirred only slightly, and without opening his eyes, he plumped another luscious berry in his mouth, and began chewing contentedly. But a little boy's smile of guilt slowly edged his lips, as he opened one cautious eye to peer at the accusing figure of his wife.

"For two days, Mister Ki-Gor, you've been rushing me along like mad, saying you had an important meeting here with Tembu George," she said, pointing a meaning finger at the Jungle Lord. "Now that we are here, I find no Tembu George, no important meeting, nothing but a lot of fruit you persist in stuffing yourself with because it is the nearest and easiest thing at hand!"

Ki-Gor's gray eyes opened wide in a great show of innocence. He made a valiant, though completely unsuccessful, effort to show hurt dismay that Helene would doubt his motives for a moment.

"Why, Helene, you know how healthful fruit is, and the fact it happens to be hanging right at arm's reach from me has nothing to do with my eating it," he righteously pointed out. "And you know also how very good rest is to build a person up. That's the only reason I am lying down."

The red-haired girl looked at the superbly proportioned body of her mate, and burst out laughing. "You certainly look like you need to be built up, you frail little mountain of a man!"

"Well, anyway," he grinned, "it is

only proper to show adequate appreciation of gifts so conveniently and lavishly provided for us by nature." Stretching out his hand he urged, "Here, try some of these berries you'll find them delicious."

Helene tossed her red hair in a definite negative reply, and nudged Ki-Gor's ribs with one small foot.

"I will not let you fill me up on those things," she declared. "You promised to catch me some fish for lunch if I would hurry, and I want my fish!"

Ki-Gor shook his head apologetically. "Wrong time of day. Never catch fish this time of day. Better wait until morning."

He watched the slim, briefly clad girl turn with a switch of her hips and walk to where his spear rested on the ground. She bent, picked it up, and returned to place it across his chest.

"I want fish!" she said.

The white man glanced from spear to river, and reflected sadly, "Too muddy. I could never get anything in that muddy water. Besides, Tembu George is due to arrive any minute, and there wouldn't be time to cook fish even if we caught any."

"Fish, Ki-Gor!" Helene stated, catching the arm of the feebly protesting Jungle Lord, tugging mightily. With much groaning he got to his feet, and then abruptly he swept Helene up under one arm, and grasping the spear with the other, strode toward the river, humming loudly and tunelessly.

"Put me down, Ki-Gor! Don't you dare throw me in that river!" Helene cried, wriggling and kicking as she tried to escape. On he strode, unperturbed by the rising din of her cries. At the very edge of the bank, he halted, carefully putting his spear down. He appeared to debate as to where to throw the laughing, struggling girl, and then his solemn face breaking into a smile, he carefully set her down on the bank.

"Now sit there, and don't go puddling around the river bank," he told her, "because there are some very discerning crocodiles hereabouts who would like nothing better than a red-haired, long-legged young lady for dessert today."

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Now you go to work."

Helene watched the agile grace with which the big man crouched and picked up the spear. He straightened, threw back his massive shoulders, and walked several steps away to where the bank overhung a quiet, deep pool. He studied the spot, and then satisfied, he bent to one knee, holding the spear ready.

Minutes passed, and the motionless Jungle Lord was a graven image, his keen, searching eyes alone betraying the restless energy he held in check. Then the muscles of his shoulder and arm abruptly tensed, as he caught sight of a movement in the water below. A large fish passed with a languid grace up from the depths toward the surface. It swept by within Ki-Gor's reach, but he made no move, for with the subtle judgment of a wild creature, he knew the chances were still too great against a certain catch.

The big fish turned, and swept up ever closer to the surface, then came in close to the bank. The speed of the Jungle Lord's action bewildered the eye. With the smooth sureness of a piston-drive, his powerful muscles sent the spear point true, even before the cold lightning in the finny body could pull the fish to safety. The practiced skill of a primitive fisherman showed in the adroit manner in which Ki-Gor spun the twisting fish safely from the water and deposited it carefully on the dry ground behind him.

Helene gleefully slapped her hands, watching the success of her husband. "Ho, ho," she taunted him, "too muddy to catch anything, is it? Now, my vegetarian friend, we begin to make some progress. Two more as big as that, and you may go back to your resting."

She jumped to her feet and ran up the bank to make preparations for cooking the meal. The Jungle Lord glanced at her running form, and with a smile turned back to his patient task. Crouching on one knee, he again seemed to freeze into stone, so still was his great body.

Pell mell up the low slope ran Helene in her typically enthusiastic manner. Occupied with the matter before her, she paid little attention to her surroundings, giving not a glance to the barrier of shrubs, brush and thorn which rose head high around the clearing where they had made camp. She bent to select stones to be heated red hot in flames as the first step in preparing leaf wrapped fish steamed to mouth-watering deliciousness in the native manner. She picked up one rock, and started to reach for another when a low ominous rumble of sound jerked her upright.

There at the edge of the clearing restlessly moved a big lion, its mane golden in a bright shaft of sunlight. The huge male glanced arrogantly around, his baleful yellow eyes coming to rest on the girl. Out of the jungle behind the sleek male padded a lioness, nervously testing the air.

Fright burned through Helene with an electric blaze. She kept her head, however, and though prickles of anxiety ran along her spine, with deliberate slowness she edged backward one step, then another.

Tense, evil, yellow eyes flickered and burned at her like twin torches. Every instinct urged her to turn screaming and flee but with iron will she fought off this suicidal impulse. Her greatest hope lay in Ki-Gor's keen senses, for if the lions waited a few more moments before deciding to charge, she felt it was a certainty her mate would discover something was wrong and in some miraculous manner forestall the fate which faced her.

But now the great male grew more restless than ever; his jaws opened and the long tearing teeth glinted whitely against the red cavern of his mouth. Issuing from his deep chest came a thunderous rumble of hate, and he gathered himself in cat fashion for a swift, raging charge at the defenseless woman.

The hideous challenge of the lion struck Ki-Gor's ears like a thunderclap. He spun up and around, his gray eyes

knifing up to Helene and beyond to take in the situation at a glance. The surface robe of civilization was torn away by what he saw. His nostrils spread and whitened, his firm lips drew back over his teeth in an unuttered snarl. Propelled by a jungle fury as great as that of the stalking lion, he leaped forward to face the beast and shield Helene. Before Ki-Gor could reach her, the huge lion straightened from its crouch and flung with mad speed toward the girl.

Ki-Gor knew instantly he could never reach her. There was but one long chance, and he took it. His steel muscles corded as he braked to a stop, and drawing the heavy spear in his right arm back, he plunged it forward with tremendous speed. The terrible power of the throw sent the heavy spear hurtling like a weightless shadow. It sped past the cringing girl and crashed between the fore legs of the charging lion, through the beast's chest and deep into its vitals. The skewered animal in its final plunge dashed the spear hilt against the ground driving it in deeper. Then with a last gurgling roar of pain the big male careened to one side of Helene and fell shuddering and dying in the dirt.

Maddened by the sound of her dying mate, the lioness, slavering with anger and excitement, bounded forward to the attack. Ki-Gor had anticipated this move, however, and the moment he threw the spear he resumed his leaping rush. He swept by Helene, straight at the oncoming lioness. The knife from his belt sheath gleamed in his right hand. There was a lash of bodies and a blinding melee of dust. The harsh grunts of the man mingled with the staccato growling hate of the animal. Through the cloud of dust Helene saw Ki-Gor fasten himself with unbreakable grip on the back of the lioness, his left arm tight about the creature's throat, while the right hand drove the knife with relentless power again and again into the chest. The plunging beast staggered and stumbled and fell lifeless. Ki-Gor stepped back lightly from the inert body, and the cruel mask on his face softened and disappeared. He pulled a great draught of air into his lungs, then bent with steady hands to clean his knife. Thrusting the weapon back in its sheath, he turned, calm and unshaken, and walked to Helene's side.

"It's all right now," he said.

Her eyes were still large with fright, but seeing how unperturbed her mate was, she caught hold of her feelings, and smiling, reached out a small hand to caress Ki-Gor's arm.

She smiled, and her voice was steady, as she said, "You really have a time trying to get your wife fed, don't you, Ki-Gor?"

He took her by the arm and guided her close to the riverbank. Selecting a clear spot for a fire, he set about collecting firewood and stones for heating. Expertly he arranged the wood and stones, and in the age-old jungle manner of rapidly revolving a dry stick with his broad hands, he soon had flames biting their way along the base of the wood. Helene gathered the proper leaves, long, broad, heavy leaves to

wrap the fish in, while Ki-Gor deftly prepared the fish for cooking.

The Jungle Lord was busy, his back turned to the river, when Helene, looking up the river suddenly cried, "Here comes Tembu George now!"

"I might know food would bring him hurrying at top speed," Ki-Gor said without turning from his task.

Shielding her eyes, Helene strained to make out the figures in the distant boat which swept down stream towards them.

"He certainly is traveling in style," she commented, "that looks like the finest war canoe the Masai ever turned out."

His curiosity aroused, Ki-Gor turned to peer downstream, the opposite direction from which the boat approached. In a puzzled tone he asked, "Where is any war canoe?"

"Why, right there," the girl cried.

He looked up the river then and instantly arose. "That can't be Tembu George. He will come from the other direction."

Gliding swiftly with the current, the big craft came at a fast pace. It was a long, low, rakish boat, seating at least twelve warriors. Paddles dipped rhythmically into the glittering water sending the craft along with practiced skill and precision. Ki-Gor made out the dark forms of the oarsmen now, and he saw the black carved prow.

Apparently the men in the canoe had sighted the couple on the bank, for they veered in and slackened their pace. There was a harsh cry, a flurry of action by the rowers, and the big craft slowed almost to a standstill, and nosed its way up to the bank a few yards from where the jungle couple stood. In the manner of skilled river men, the natives hastily made the boat fast to the shore.

The Jungle Lord saw the leader of the warriors leap ashore. The man was tall and thin, with a lean hard face and nervous, darting eyes. Those uneasy eyes ran quickly over Helene and Ki-Gor, and then the man raised his right hand and called out a greeting of peace. The words he spoke were ones Ki-Gor knew, but his accents were of some distant locality.

"Welcome, traveler," the big white man said, responding to the native's greeting. "The war canoe you have there is one to be proud of."

"Aye! I am proud of it," the black man replied. His eyes flickered past Ki-Gor to Helene and then off up the slope.

"It has carried us far and fast this day," he said. "Tell me, is this the country of the Wasuli? It is many years since I was last here and the region has changed, making it difficult for me to be exactly sure of my place."

Ki-Gor noted that the other natives in the long canoe were now all ashore, and each man was fully armed. With studied casualness, he took in every detail of the group, meanwhile answering, "Yes, this is the upper edge of the Wasuli area, and their region extends down river a half-day's ride at least, even in your swift craft."

Several of the men scattered up the bank, and though the Jungle Lord in no

way betrayed the knowledge, his searching eyes knew the men were on the lookout for others who might be in company with the jungle couple. With regret, he remembered his bow and quiver of arrows lying where he had left them by a shrub, and his heavy spear resting against a tree where he had placed it after dispatching the lion.

From two of the natives padding about in the clearing above them came surprised exclamations. They had come on the bodies of the slain beasts. They called to their leader, and Helene and Ki-Gor accompanied him to the spot. He looked at the big bodies, studying the wounds, and with a tone of unbelieving admiration in his voice he asked Ki-Gor, "Who did this?"

"I did," the Jungle Lord stated simply, without any trace of boastfulness for to him the deed was not in the least unusual.

"You are a great warrior to have done this singlehanded," commented the tall black man, his uneasy eyes weighing and appraising Ki-Gor again. "What is your name?"

"I am Ki-Gor," was the answer.

"I am Basru," the native volunteered. "I come from a place of great warriors, but by the golden moon, I know no other man who could have performed such a deed as this."

He turned away to go, barking a command for his men to board the canoe. As though trained to obey, the natives turned toward the craft. The hostility Ki-Gor had sensed lurking in the strangers, he suddenly thought, seemed unwarranted. The bronzed jungle man moved to accompany the native leader to the riverbank. It was this momentary relaxation of his instinctive guard that Ki-Gor was long to regret. As the Jungle Lord walked along with Basru toward the boat, he paid little attention to the two big natives who lingered behind their fellows and now ambled slowly along at his back.

Basru raised his hand as though to stroke his hair, and at this signal, the two black men who trailed behind flung themselves on Ki- Gor's back. The completely unexpected onslaught sent the Jungle Lord crashing to his knees under the shocked eyes of Helene before he knew what was happening.

But Ki-Gor's trained reflexes changed him into a raging fury by the time he struck the earth. He made no single outcry, but fought silently, desperately, terribly, from the first moment he could bring his great muscles into play. His steel-hard hands caught hold of one of the native's ankles and the sheer overwhelming pressure of his grip burst the man's skin and flesh as he tore him down within closer reach. He snapped the native's neck like a rotten twig and lashed out with mighty blows that caved in the ribs of the other native.

The treacherous Basru, seeing that the massive white man was recovering his footing, picked up a big rock and darted in behind Ki- Gor. The native smashed the rock down once, twice, against Ki-Gor's skull. This cowardly blow accomplished what the two natives had failed to do. Ki-Gor pitched face for-

ward like a felled ox. Helene screamed in horror as she saw her beloved mate lying crumpled, blood gushing from his head.

In panic she started to throw herself at Ki-Gor, but ruthless hands caught her arms and drew her back.

Basru's cruel eyes shifted from the fallen Jungle Lord to the sobbing girl. "You'll have no further need of him, woman. He's dead, or if he's not, he soon will be."

At an order from Basru, Helene was taken to the boat, but it took three men to force the struggling girl along. The hard-faced native leader glanced at Ki-Gor's unmoving form, debated a moment, then directed the white man also be brought along to the boat.

"The great Serpent God will smile on us for this day's work," Basru said in a pleased voice. "Even as the High Priestess ordered us, we have found a worthy sacrifice for the Festival of the Seventh Moon."

The tall leader jumped into the war canoe to see personally to the binding of Helene's wrists and ankles. She was forced to lie down in the bow of the boat, so that her red hair and fair skin could not be detected by anyone watching from shore. Satisfied that the girl was safely tied and placed, Basru ordered the boat cast off. His eye ran down the row of men waiting with paddles ready, and came to light on the big form of Ki-Gor. The natives had carried the white man and placed him in the boat, assuming from Basru's directions that he intended taking the Jungle Lord along.

"We have no use for that lifeless hulk," he called out sharply. "I meant only for you to bring him to the river bank and throw him into the water, thus erasing all trace of his body. Quickly now, throw him over the side."

Helene fought at her bonds, and succeeded in straining her head up to plead with Basru. He ignored her tumbling words, and the two men nearest Ki-Gor, rose and caught hold of the Jungle Lord. Through reddened tear-wet eyes, Helene saw the natives lift the limp and unresisting Ki-Gor and toss him out over the low side of the war canoe. She heard the loud splash as he struck the water. Simultaneously, Basru's harsh voice called out a command and the boat jumped forward and with steadily increasing speed cut its way Upstream through the sluggish current.

II. - Amnesia

KI-GOR'S long heavy frame struck the water hard as the two natives threw him overboard. The flat shock caused an instinctive reflex in the jungle-bred giant, a sudden tightening of his muscles even though his mind was fogged deep in unconsciousness. The spark of life in this powerful man was not easily quenched. The will to live burned in him, conscious or unconscious, more strongly than it would in any civilized man, because this will, above all else, was the sustaining force which had brought him through innumerable seemingly hopeless situations.

The shock of the fall, the tensing of his muscles sent a faint glimmer of feel-

ing along his stunned nerve centers. The cool water pressed further awareness into his numbed body, and then as he sank below the surface, the water bit into the deep gash on his head. This abrupt burning pain jerked Ki-Gor back to semi-consciousness. He awoke in choking blackness, and without reasoning, he threw his energies into an immediate, frenzied fight.

Where it would have seemed impossible for a normal man to have will or strength left for a struggle, Ki-Gor's jungle heritage rallied his waning energies. Flailing ponderously, gulping great quantities of water, he fought his head above the surface.

The big man's body was an agony of hurt and weariness. His eyes saw nothing. His lungs labored and fought to sustain his failing strength. But an inner force pushed him on, calling forth from his spent muscles another, and still another, effort. It was an eternity of time, a burning stretch of aeons, that he floated and sank, and floated again, until through luck, his own unseeing efforts, and the eddying movement of the slow current, he came into a shallow stretch of water near the bank.

Ki-Gor tried to walk in the shallow water, but his legs refused to sustain him. He stumbled and fell repeatedly, each time having even greater difficulty in rising again. But each time he did rise. He came finally to the low bank, and with one last mighty effort, he pulled himself up on the dry land, and fell face downward.

The big white man lay in a tumbled heap, his long body pressed into the gently waving growth of river ferns and grass. Blood from the ugly gash on his head ran down over his face and dripped on the warm earth. He slept the deep, black sleep of utter exhaustion and painful hurt. Africa's ever present clouds of venomous little insects sought him out and feasted their greed, but Ki-Gor, wrapped in black forgetfulness, was unconscious of their torturing bites. The slender shadows of the grass fronds steadily lengthened across his body as the sun departed westward in a hot and shimmering sky.

Shadows crept out from the great trees along the bank, and slipped over Ki-Gor to dull the surface of the water. A faint breeze sifted down the river and with it came night. A mist, gray and ominous, rolled along the river, gathering in density, and rolling out wetly over the banks. Still Ki-Gor lay unmoving in the damp grass, his breath coming with a hard deep regular rhythm. .

Once a large buck, followed by two does, came out of a lane in the forest, and on soundless feet in the soft turf, picked its way to water. With the manscent blanketed by the mist, the daintily stepping feet of the buck were almost upon Ki-Gor before the wary creature sighted the white form. Instantly the animal froze, his nostrils swelling out in search of danger. Reassured by the absolute quiet of the white body, the buck soon swerved off to the left and continued to the water's edge, obediently followed by the two does.

The long night was merging into dawn when a lone jackal, after hours of

luckless foraging for easy prey, came panting down to the river to fill its hungry belly with the cool water. The dirty, bedraggled, jungle scavenger picked its way along in the natural cringing gait of its breed. Slavering in disgruntlement, the jackal padded up to the bank and lapped thirstily. After a full minute, it raised its head nervously and snuffled at the air. The fur on the animal's back bristled up at the scent of man, and after a slight wait, the gray form watchfully moved to follow the scent. The evil ghost crept within cautious yards of Ki-Gor. The savage brain of the animal sought out and weighed the man's hurt, balancing the risk of attack against possible gain for its grumbling belly.

The still form of the Jungle Lord, with its fresh blood scent, stimulated beyond endurance the greedy gnawing of the beast's stomach.

The jackal, sensing life in the sprawling body, fought to down its fear of man. With quiet, nervous steps it padded a wide ring around Ki-Gor, its teeth grinning whitely as rising hunger tried to force courage into its cowardly heart.

The soft, early-morning wind caught the strong smell of the beast and brought it to Ki-Gor's nostrils. For the first time since he had crawled out of the water, the bronzed giant stirred. He shifted uneasily, but did not waken. The jackal tensed at this movement and stood head pointed at the man. Again the strong jackal scent poured into Ki-Gor's consciousness. A primal protective sense shook his nerves from their stunned lethargy, and his gray eyes flickered open.

Urged by the strong scent of danger, Ki-Gor struggled to focus his eyes. His vision in the faint light of dawn formed only a confusing, colorless blur. The jackal growled, sensing the helplessness of the man. Under the stimulus of this noise, Ki-Gor made out the menacing figure of the scavenger, the beast's form swimming in outline against a weaving, shifting background. The jackal girded its courage to the maximum and advanced with stiff, bristling steps toward the Jungle Lord. Ki-Gor could see now the white fangs of the hated skulker, and a wave of sheer anger at this most cowardly of all beasts churned enough strength into his legs to heave the Jungle Lord to his feet.

He stood there weaving, fighting off waves of nausea. Try as he might, Ki-Gor could not make his feet respond to his will. With bare hands he tried to advance, but he was unable to walk. The jackal slowed its advance, and then halted. A fallen man was one thing, but an aroused one, even though wounded, was another matter. The animal debated, emitting low snarls, and then as Ki-Gor at last achieved a staggering step forward, the jackal leaped back, and with one last growling outburst, turned and darted away.

Ki-Gor watched the animal disappear. Abruptly the swimming blur closed over his vision again as the sense of danger faded. A numbness crept over the Jungle Lord, and with a sense of great effort, he slipped to his knees and awkwardly stretched out in the wet grass. Dull, aching sleep came over him, and his mind shut itself off from the

stirring daylight world.

When the Jungle Lord next roused, the sun stood high in the sky, its scorching rays beating directly on his now dry and feverish body. He sat up. He looked about him with heavy-lidded eyes, puzzled eyes that sought an understanding of his present predicament. Slowly he lifted an exploratory hand and felt his aching head, probing the gash there.

His brows furrowed in thought, but the terrific blows dealt him had blocked the delicate memory mechanism. Events of not only the past few days, but of the past years, refused to come. The cruel blow had cut Ki-Gor off from the past, cutting away from him at the same time the acquired veneer of civilization which contact with Helene and others of the outer world had brought him.

He stood up and drew a deep breath into his great lungs. Already his marvelous recuperative powers were at work restoring power and strength to his hard muscles. In a few days, with the proper rest and no untoward accidents, he would be as sound and vigorous as before. But there was a vague uneasiness in his mind for he sensed that all was not well. He tried to reach back through the curtain which had fallen so suddenly and grasp at the memories which troubled him, but which he could not pluck from his subconscious.

Ki-Gor shook his aching head and glanced around him. His eyes halted on the inviting water of the river. He walked to the bank and washed the caked blood and grime from his head and shoulders. Then he drank deeply. Refreshed, the big man rose and went at a slow gait toward the rising wall of the jungle. He walked into the darkening shadows of the trees for a distance of about one-hundred yards, and then, selecting a towering giant of a tree, he climbed cautiously into its upper limbs. In the high branches of the tall tree, he selected a comfortable perch, leaned back against the trunk and closed his aching eyes. The gentle sway and movement of the ancient tree quickly lulled the big man to sleep. So passed another night and day, with Ki-Gor, except for occasional trips to the river, resting and sleeping like any animal recovering from its wounds. The feverish burn left Ki-Gor's body, and he shook off the sense of giddy weakness. Hunger began to prick him into activity. He set out in search of food. His keen eyes searched the jungle floor for the fresh spoor of game, and at length along a narrow trail he came across recent signs made by a small buck.

The Jungle Lord's long stride lengthened, as driven by hunger, he quickened his pace. He sped down the narrow green aisle, eluding the occasional choking stands of bramble, slipping wraith-like over the bunched undergrowth.

Ever fresher was the scent of the deer. Ki-Gor's hand slipped automatically to the hilt of his knife, the always present knife which had stayed at his waist even during his struggles in the water. The blade gleamed free in his right hand. The jungle was silent except for the raucous calls of a few brilliantly plumaged birds.

Ki-Gor's passage was soundless. He was in every sense a cunning relentless huntsman. He was downwind from the unsuspecting buck, and though the animal's scent drew him on like a magnet, his own presence was protected from the hunted creature. He glided within yards of where the buck stood browsing.

He sprinted to within arm's reach of the fleeing buck, and in a bounding leap, dived on the animal with crushing weight. The shock of Ki-Gor's onslaught toppled the buck, and his knife bit deep into the creature's vitals as it fell.

His appetite satisfied, the Jungle Lord stretched luxuriously and looked about for a protected resting place. But a strange feeling of urgency began to permeate his being, and refused to let him rest. Though he was completely unable to fathom the reason, something within him propelled Ki-Gor back to the river. He gave in to this inner urging and began moving leisurely back along the trail he had recently traversed.

When Ki-Gor reached the river, he hesitated a moment and then swung upstream. It was not long before the cat-treading white giant neared the clearing where the natives had attacked him and carried off Helene. Ki-Gor did not think at this time of the treacherous assault. He did not recall the event, for the dreadful blows he had suffered on the head had blotted out even any remembrance of Helene. Buried deep within his subconscious, however, was the burning knowledge of his mate and it was this that drew him back to the clearing.

Ki-Gor came up to the edge of the clearing along a narrow animal trail through a rustling break of tall reeds. He paused, cautious jungle creature that he was, to survey the ground ahead before advancing into the open. His keen gray eyes automatically searched the clearing, alert for any sign of danger.

Ki-Gor's eyes suddenly narrowed and grew cold. He drew back into the concealment of the reeds, and the powerful muscles along his lean hard body tightened. There on the river bank, its carved prow drawn up on the green grass, stood a long, grim war canoe.

III. - The Black Arrow

Ki-Gor stared long at the war craft. The sight of the boat stirred a feeling of anger in him, started the blood surging through his veins. This instantaneous reaction was a completely unreasoning one, for he had no idea why this sight should stir such emotions. Soon his careful, wary visual search for any sign of life or hidden enemy, convinced him the open plot was deserted.

Satisfied no enemy lurked in ambush, the Jungle Lord glided out of the rustling reeds to the war canoe. The scent of natives, still fresh and strong, was in the boat. Ki-Gor studied the footprints about the boat, and then went up the low slope following the natives' clear trail. At the top of the slope, he found the remains of a recent campfire and scattered remnants of food.

He was painstakingly studying the ground, when nearby he heard the muffled voices of natives. Ki-Gor stood

still for a moment, judging the sound. He turned then and ran lightly to a gnarled tree a few yards away. With one powerful spring, he leapt high in the air, caught a sturdy branch, and rapidly pulled himself up into the leafy protection of the upper boughs.

The white man watched narrowly as three armed natives, tall, brawny men, emerged from a jungle trail and passed directly below him. He saw the warriors halt and place their spears and bows against a small tree, and then sit down close together near the burned out fire. His eyes studied with interest the long heavy knives carried by the men, deadly blades which they did not discard even now when they were resting.

Although all three of the black men were exceptionally fine physical specimens, Ki-Gor's eyes were drawn especially to the largest and most superbly proportioned of the natives. This man was a massive warrior, graceful as a panther. There was an air of quiet assurance about him. He wore no gaudy tribal markings nor any of the usual native decorations, but there was a definite air of command about him, a clear indication that he was a chieftain.

The three men sat for a long time, staring moodily at the ground, seldom conversing. Though every stranger in the jungle is potentially an enemy until proved otherwise, Ki-Gor oddly enough felt no threat resting in these men. For reasons he could not explain, a sudden urge came over him to make known his presence. He was armed with only a knife, however, and even though he felt there was no danger to be feared from these warriors, he was cautious enough to advantageously place himself as close to their discarded spears as possible.

He worked his way silently out along a broad overhanging limb. Then Ki-Gor dropped to the ground on cushioned feet, and moved so swiftly and quietly that he stood before the three sitting natives almost before they sensed his presence. The startled natives looked up in unison, and for a moment their hands hesitated at the hilts of the heavy knives. Ki-Gor's face betrayed no sign of emotion, but inwardly he enjoyed the bewilderment of the natives immensely. It was a tribute to his wisdom, however, that his right hand hovered ever close to the shaft of one man's spear.

The expressions of alarm on the warrior's faces quickly changed to bewildered surprise. They seemed unable to believe their eyes. They stared speechless at Ki-Gor. The massive warrior was the first to regain his tongue.

"Ki-Gor!" he boomed out in a surprised, unbelieving voice. "But how can it be you?"

The now friendly eyes of the huge Negro looked expectantly past the Jungle Lord searching for another person. He seemed disappointed to find the white man alone.

"But where is Helene?" the warrior asked, his voice reflecting deep concern. "Is she hurt? Where is she?"

Ki-Gor listened gravely to the man's words. The tongue he spoke was familiar; it was the language of the Masai. Ki-Gor understood the words, but he did

not understand what the native spoke about. His face showed clearly how puzzled he was.

"I come as a friend," the Jungle Lord said slowly, "but I do not understand your questions. Perhaps you mistake me for some other one you know."

The mouth of the natives' spokesman dropped open at this odd statement from the great Ki-Gor, the firm friend of many years, the beloved companion and leader in many exciting and dangerous adventures.

"I-I'm Tembu George! What's wrong with you? Surely you can't be joking."

The Jungle Lord studied the native's face a moment and then repeated, half to himself, "Tembu George." After a pause, he again addressed Tembu George, saying, "I have no reason to joke, Tembu George, I don't recall seeing you before, and I have no knowledge of the person you call Helene."

Tembu George stood up now, and came closer to the white man. The concern he felt at Ki-Gor's strange tone was apparent. His grave eyes, as he came closer, noted the ugly gash on Ki-Gor's head.

"You have suffered a bad hurt recently," Tembu George stated, noting every action of his friend. "How did you get that cut?"

Ki-Gor's hand raised to the gash and his brows knit in thought. "Somehow I can't seem to remember" he replied.

"Hmmm. And what did you say your name was," Tembu George asked, snapping the question quickly.

In normal fashion and with every evidence of assurance, the Jungle Lord started to reply, "Why, I am ... I am." He halted and passed his hand over his brow.

"It is a ridiculous thing," Ki-Gor said in a sheepish, yet worried tone, "But I can't for the life of me tell you my name."

Tembu George stood looking directly into his eyes now. "You are Ki-Gor, my friend of many years," he said. "Somehow you have been injured and are suffering from a loss of memory. It was over four days ago that I was to meet you and your mate, Helene, here at this spot."

The warrior turned and glanced at his two gaping men. He looked then down the slope to the riverbank for a few moments before turning back to his friend.

"When we arrived there were clear signs that a boat had brought men ashore down there. There was abundant evidence you had been here." And now there was a hint of a smile in Tembu George's eyes, "for we found the carcasses of two lions lying over there."

Ki-Gor listened carefully to the big Negro's words. Instinctively, he felt this man was a friend, a good friend who could be trusted. "Tell me more," he said.

"Well, reconstructing the scene from the evidence we could find, it is certain that a group of natives, roughly about twelve, came ashore from a war canoe, talked with you and Helene for a period of time, and then there was a sudden brief struggle right over there. There were blood stains leading from

that spot down to the boat."

Ki-Gor tried hard to recall this scene which was described to him but he could remember no single detail. He shook his head, indicating his complete lack of knowledge of the event.

"When we arrived the signs were still very fresh, and we thought you had been carried off by boat," Tembu George said. "We went up river two days' journey but could find no sign of a war canoe so we returned to search this place more carefully."

The Masai chieftain related the details of his four day search for Ki- Gor and Helene. He knew it was impossible that the marauders had gone down river because he would have encountered them as he approached. The two day search up river was completely fruitless, as there was no evidence to be found of any raiding party. Without any lead to aid him, Tembu George therefore returned to the clearing to search for further evidence. His men were now beating the jungle approaches to the clearing thoroughly for any clue as to the identity of the attackers or for any sign that Helene or Ki-Gor either one might have escaped into the forest.

While Ki-Gor listened, Masai warriors began to return in groups of two and three to the clearing. Any further proof needed by Ki-Gor that he was well known to Tembu George was quickly given by these men. Each native, as soon as he sighted the bronzed Jungle Lord cried out in pleased surprise and called him by name. These powerful warriors, respected the length and breadth of Africa for their grim fighting qualities, immediately showed a worried sympathy when they learned from their fellows of their great friend Ki-Gor's strange behavior.

"This Helene," Ki-Gor said, "but how could I forget my own mate?"

"The mind is a strange thing," Tembu George replied, "but even though fate has struck you such a sudden, unkind blow, we must delay no longer than absolutely necessary our search for Helene."

Ki-Gor nodded his approval. "Aye, the trail grows cold as we wait."

Tembu George was somewhat cheered by Ki-Gor's response. The Jungle Lord was undoubtedly convinced that he spoke the truth and that he was the white man's friend. "Our search proves Helene did not go into the jungle, so it is evident she was carried away upstream by boat. Come, let us follow."

Pleased at the prospect of avenging the wrong done Ki-Gor, the rangy Masai warriors swiftly gathered their war gear and hastened to the boat. The Jungle Lord was lifted from his puzzled gloom by the friendly bond which he felt ever more strongly for these stalwart fighting men. He felt kinship with them, and a hope, that through their company and aid, the dark blank in his mind would be remedied.

Ki-Gor followed the Masai down the slope. He paused as he came to the carved prow of the black war canoe. He stared hard at the prow for a long minute. Tembu George saw the rapt

expression on his friend's face, and came over to him. The Masai chieftain looked at the prow, but saw nothing except the familiar panther figurehead.

"The figurehead," Ki-Gor said suddenly. "Somehow the sight of that prow brings back the memory of another war canoe. One with the figurehead of a fanged serpent."

"Fanged serpent," Tembu George repeated thoughtfully after him. "I know the tribal symbols used throughout this region, and that is not one of them. I believe this is the clue we needed to find Helene."

Tembu George consulted with his men carefully, and in great earnestness, they discussed the serpent figurehead described by Ki- Gor, concluding the war canoe must have come from far afield.

Ki-Gor listened to the discussion, then pointed out, "If the symbol is an unusual one, then certainly it will be noticed somewhere along the river, and if we try hard enough we are sure to find those who have seen the boat pass."

The Masai made their boat ready now, and skillfully they cast off and swept upstream in search of the foe. The muscled blacks bent to their work, and in fast, smooth rhythm their broad paddles cut the placid surface of the wide river. The proud war canoe scudded forward at a fast, sustained pace.

Long, hot hours passed, and still the broad backs of the Masai resisted fatigue. The paddles rose and fell with deceptive ease as the men labored under the burning sun. The bright green of the jungle, unbroken except for brilliantly colored splotches of flowers, flowed by, an impenetrable sameness that wearied the eye. The merciless bright sky dimmed before the approach of evening, and the shimmering glaze over the water softened and faded. High clouds rolled out across the sky with night. It was now Tembu George who guided the long craft ashore.

The Masai laid down their paddles, and rising stiffly from the positions so long held, stepped on land. The warriors rested and ate, taking their ease while they waited for the moon to rise. But beneath their apparent air of leisure was a restless undercurrent, for these grim men would not again rest quietly until their quarry was run to earth. Only the silent, moody Ki-Gor, looming big in the firelight as he sat apart from the others, was completely relaxed.

At last the moon came, swollen and yellow, its diffused rays reflecting silver on the river. The fire was doused, and hurriedly the natives took their places in the boat again. The wall of the jungle on each side of the river rose black and smothering above the canoe. The Masai were soon too busy to feel lost and alone in this canyon of darkness, for Tembu George set them a fast pace. The sweat gathered on their shoulders and trickled down their backs as with endless repetition they dug their paddles, sending the craft sweeping through the night.

Not until dawn tinged the cloud masses in the east with red did the Masai call another halt, but this, too, was only another breathing spell, a brief pause

to regain strength. In a short time they headed forward again, moving toward where the early morning sun hung over the already steaming horizon. The grueling pace continued except for occasional breathing spells, throughout the day. When night came, the worn men went ashore and flung themselves down to sleep heavily until midnight.

Three days and nights Tembu George pushed his men forward in this fashion. On the morning of the fourth day, the war canoe nosed up to a landing at a large native village set along the bank. Ki-Gor and Tembu George stepped out on the landing and walked through the crowd of curious natives that quickly gathered. Searching out the chief, they found him sitting before his hut, directing one of his sons in the fashioning of a spear. After an appropriate exchange of greetings, Ki- Gor asked the chief, a gaunt, humped native, whether a war canoe with a fanged serpent on its prow had been seen by any of the villagers.

The thin native sucked in his cheeks in thought, and then replied, "We have not seen this boat here, but one of my men who has been upriver described such a craft to me only yesterday."

"It is probable the boat passed this village during the night to avoid being seen," Ki-Gor pointed out to Tembu George.

Turning back to the chief, Ki-Gor asked, "Did your men see which way the boat was headed?"

"Yes, it was going up the river and was moving fast," the chief answered, proud to have such ready and complete knowledge at his fingertips.

Tembu George leaned forward eagerly now. "And tell us, did your man see a white woman in the canoe?"

The native wrinkled his forehead in thought, and scratched his skinny ribs. "No, he saw no woman in the boat. There were only warriors, men not of this region."

While the chief spoke, a slight wiry man, grizzled with years, but still strong and active came up beside him. There were white markings painted across his bare chest and his forehead was disfigured with a crudely tattooed emblem. Around his neck and wrists he wore bands of bones, teeth and odd stones, and close inspection showed many of the bones and teeth were human ones. He was the tribal witch doctor, feared and respected.

"These strangers come in search of a white woman?" he asked, as though he knew already much of the conversation that had passed between Ki- Gor and the chief.

"Yes, O wise one," responded the chief, "and they seek to trace a war canoe with the figure of a serpent carved on its prow."

His voice showing surprise at the witch doctor's knowledge of their search, Tembu George addressed the old man, "Do you know where we can find the woman?"

The grizzled witch doctor rustled his necklaces with his fingers, and his eyes looked beyond Tembu George in a far away, unseeing stare. The chief main-

tained respectful silence as the old man pondered. The witch doctor shifted his eyes to Ki-Gor and spoke directly to him.

"I recognize you as the great Ki-Gor, friend of the jungle peoples. I would like to give you some definite aid, but unfortunately my poor knowledge makes it possible only to give you a general lead."

The witch doctor paused and wrinkled his brow, as he appeared to probe his mind for the exact information he wished to give Ki-Gor.

"I have heard it said that a strange tribe," he continued slowly, "that worships a fearsome serpent, dwells many days up this river in a region of vast lakes. I believe your search would end successfully, if you could find this tribe."

Ki-Gor expressed his thanks to the witch doctor, for this slender thread of information was the first positive clue he had received as to the identity of the marauders. He and Tembu George then returned to the canoes and the wearing pace was resumed.

The burning merciless days merged into hot sweltering nights, as the grim, tireless Masai warriors unsparingly pushed themselves. The grueling punishment they took did not dampen the vengeful spirit which inspired the powerful natives. Through their prodigious efforts, in nine days the Masai brought their craft into a section of rolling hills. The river now bit its way between higher banks, banks in some places which rose to canyon proportions. But the river still lay broad and placid, a muddy, slow-moving thing.

In mid-morning on the ninth day, Tembu George selected an even, open place to halt for food and rest. The boat was made fast, and the men picked out sheltered places to relax, all except one hot, tired warrior. This rangy Masai fighting man ambled back to the river and strolled out into a shallow section, splashing the cooling water over his sweaty body. Intent on the refreshing water, he was careless of his surroundings.

The native neither felt nor saw the cold, staring eyes that fastened on him. He failed to see the slimy, gray-green bulk of the huge crocodile lying near the bank like a half-submerged log. The big reptile, with scarcely a stir of the water slid forward, placing itself between the man and the shore. As the creature reached the shallow place where the native entered the water, it used its powerful tail for leverage in climbing.

This abrupt splash roused the warrior to his danger. He turned, and with horrified eyes saw the hideous monster heading for him. The man cried out in alarm to his mates. The shout brought all the natives upright instantly, but in their surprise, they hesitated, groping for a means of saving their fellow. Ki-Gor, who also was brought to his feet by the cry, did not hesitate.

The Jungle Lord, reared to a perilous existence which depended on split-second judgment, moved with flashing speed in this fateful interval. Ki-Gor sped toward the river, scooping up a Masai spear from the ground without

breaking his stride. The crocodile was almost upon the native, its gaping jaws opened in anticipation of the kill, when the Jungle Lord leaped far out over the water directly at the reptile. As he descended, Ki-Gor bore his full weight on the haft of the spear and drove the broad, sharp point under the crocodile's left fore legs.

The bronzed giant's unerring skill enabled him to send the spear deep into this less heavily armored spot on the creature. The dreadful pain of the wound sent the monster into an agonized, writhing plunge at the defenseless native. With sudden death from the flailing tail hanging over him, Ki-Gor pressed forward. He had landed at the very side of the crocodile, and now he dived forward on the back of the slimy creature, digging his legs around its belly and his left arm encircling its neck. His free right arm wielded his long hunting knife, and he drove the steel into the crocodile's hard underthroat. Ki-Gor heard the native shriek in pain, and the sound poured more strength into his straining knife arm.

The heaving crocodile plunged forward now, mad with pain and fury, into deeper water. The deep spear wound was eating the life from the creature, but its tremendous powers were not easily dispersed. The great reptile smashed into the deep water and dived, rolling as he went, to shake loose the burden on his back. The Jungle Lord realized his only hope was to cling to the crocodile and strive for a mortal blow; for once dislodged he would fall easy prey to it in the water.

Down went the crocodile until Ki-Gor felt his lungs would burst. In the impenetrable, muddy blackness of the river bottom the reptile gave another terrific spin. It was impossible for the Jungle Lord to keep his hold from loosening. Desperately he grappled, catching himself before he was torn completely loose. He found he had slipped to one side of the creature, and though choking in his agonized craving for oxygen, he realized this was his opportunity.

He gathered his waning strength, slashed deep into the exposed under belly of the crocodile, laying its stomach open in long ragged ribbons. The crocodile shook violently and suddenly went limp. Ki- Gor's numb arms and legs released their grip and he drove to the surface.

The moment his blond head broke the water, the Jungle Lord greedily sucked deep breaths into his aching lungs. When his body's painful hunger for oxygen was sated, he turned his attention to the shore. The worried Masai, fearful that their white friend was lost, shouted with pleasure when they saw Ki-Gor strike out for land. The courageous action of Ki-Gor in leaping immediately into seeming death to save the Masai warrior was only another of many bonds which welded these indomitable fighters to the side of the beloved white leader.

Ki-Gor climbed out on the bank and went to where the rescued native lay. The man's legs were badly mangled, but Ki-Gor knew there was a chance through careful nursing to save the

man's limbs. Employing the best means at hand, he treated the wounds and stopped the bleeding.

"We will go on to the next village along the river, where perhaps we can find the proper herbs and medicines for the treatment of our comrade," Ki-Gor announced to the assembled warriors.

The wounded man weakly asked that he be left behind, so as not to interfere in any way with the search for Helene. Ki-Gor would not hear of this, and within a brief while, the wounded native was made comfortable in the war canoe, and the trip was resumed.

In a few hours, Ki-Gor spied a broad path which led out of the jungle to the river's edge. He ordered the boat moored. With the aid of Tembu George, he quickly fashioned a sturdy litter in which to carry the wounded Masai.

"This path shows it is used by many people," Ki-Gor stated, "and probably a village lies just a short distance away. We will take this man there for treatment, and perhaps we can gain further information of the serpent boat."

The broad, well-trod path was an easy avenue through the dense forest. The Masai, wary in this strange land of possible foes, ranged themselves in a long skirmish line, and held their weapons ready. Ki- Gor advanced at the head of the column. It was roughly an hour's journey over the clean winding trail before the warriors sighted a large village. The men held back as Ki-Gor walked up to the open entrance to the stockade surrounding the cluster of huts. Two natives lounging inside the gate looked up in surprise at the massive white man, but they evidenced no enmity. He held up his hand, palm outward, in the sign of peace, and the men returned the greeting, calling out to him in a dialect that was closely akin to the Wasuli.

"Welcome, O white one, who comes under the sign of peace," one of the natives said in a shrill voice.

Ki-Gor responded with the words, "Greetings, O friends, I would see your chief."

The natives rose without haste and escorted the Jungle Lord down a lane between the huts to a thatched abode somewhat larger than the rest. In answer to their calls, the lion's skin hung over the door was thrust aside, and the chief came out. He was a fat, genial native, of medium height with round eyes and a mild, honest face.

"I am Ki-Gor," the Jungle Lord said simply, "and I need your help in treating one of my friends who has been injured by a crocodile."

The round eyes of the native grew even rounder, as he expressed his sympathy at this news. "I am Wabumaa. You are welcome in my village. We are a peaceful people and we welcome in friendship all those who come in peace."

Ki-Gor's trained eyes already had ascertained that this was not a war- like tribe. There was ample evidence these people were friendly and peace-loving, preferring to live a simple, plain, safe existence, instead of the sometimes rich, but always dangerous, costly life of a war-like, marauding tribe.

Ki-Gor thanked Wabumaa and the two went out to meet the waiting Masai. The roly-poly little chief stared with frank admiration at the stalwart warriors who came forward at the white man's motion. The wounded Masai was quickly made comfortable in a vacant hut, and a brew of rare herbs was prepared to heal his lacerated legs.

Weary after their days of strained, unrelenting haste, Ki-Gor, Tembu George and their men soon took advantage of this opportunity for rest. They sought cool, sheltered spots and soon were fast asleep, all except one man who sat beside the injured warrior. It was nightfall when the increasing clatter and bustle within the village roused the Masai one by one. Ki-Gor awakened, completely refreshed, and went to search out the reason for the unusual stir.

He found the amiable Wabumaa waddling about in a pleased bustle, giving directions right and left. He was preparing a feast for the visitors. The chief, being both a hospitable man and also one who enjoyed celebrations, had no intention of letting this excellent excuse for a banquet pass unheeded. The air was fragrant with the satisfying aroma of cooking meat. The circular area about the lone, big tree which had been left standing in the center of the village was being prepared for the diners.

Perspiring, but wreathed with smiles, the chief motioned to Ki-Gor and the Masai to take their places. Wabumaa's men joined them, sitting cross-legged in a wide circle around the tree. Wabumaa made a gracious, flowery address repeating in detail his briefer welcome of earlier in the day. Tembu George replied in kind, as required by native etiquette and then the heaping platters of savory game and fresh fruits were brought forward.

Ki-Gor had hardly begun his meal when there was a sudden, splintering thud. An abrupt silence fell over the company. The eyes of the natives shifted to a point on the tree trunk about eight feet from the ground. Following the chief's gaze, Ki-Gor looked to see a long, black arrow embedded in the tree, its haft vibrating.

Ki-Gor glanced around the ring of staring natives. Their gay, happy mood of a few moments before was completely gone.

Ki-Gor stood up, walked to the tree, and jerked the long black arrow free. He turned back to the chief and inquired, "What is wrong with your people? Does this one arrow shot by a sneaking bowman have some evil significance?"

The chief rose now, his plump face troubled, as he sought words to answer Ki-Gor. "It is the Black Arrow of the Serpent God!" he said fearfully. "It means my two finest warriors must go to their death!"

IV. - The Sacrifice of Zaa

HELENE began to believe the long nightmare of the canoe trip would never end. Forced to lie on the floor of the boat, cramped by her bonds, barely protected from the burning sun, she was worn and exhausted. The harsh Basru

paid her scant attention except to see she was well fed, and that she did not want for water.

The red haired girl, consumed with her burning sorrow, gave little notice to the rising spirits exhibited by her abductors one morning, and the renewed energy with which they began to ply their paddles. Had she been interested, she would have known the men were nearing home. The war canoe had left the broad river and sped up one of its tributaries. By midday the canoe fought through a long, turbulent stretch of rapids to glide out upon a vast, blue lake.

An island stood, green and inviting in the middle of the lake, and Basru directed his course straight for it. When the island rose close before them, three other craft darted from a hidden cove.

One of the craft drew near and its captain, after careful inspection called out: "After all these days, surely you don't return empty handed, friend Basru!"

Basru's hard face broke into a wide smile as he bent and carefully raised Helene to a standing position. With an eloquent gesture, he triumphantly indicated the precious cargo he carried. The captain at this sight swept in very close, and gazed with long interest at Helene, who remained breathtakingly beautiful despite the hardships she had suffered.

The man nodded his head admiringly and called, "You have done well, Basru! This voyage will win you the favor of the Serpent God."

Helene looked at the broad lake, the green island, and the towering mountains which rose in the far distance. This was a strange region, an area completely unfamiliar to her. She noted the island was quite large and the banks were grown up with huge trees.

Basru skillfully brought the war canoe in near shore, sending it gliding up a narrow inlet into a snug harbor which nature had carefully camouflaged from outside view. The boat was soon beached, and for the first time since her capture, Helene was completely freed of her bonds. When the cramps in her legs and arms were relieved, the tired girl climbed from the boat.

A smooth, clear road led from the beach into the forest. It was up this road Basru and his men escorted Helene past clumps of staring natives with ill-concealed pride. The jungle girl noted with interest that the avenue was paved with blocks of wellworn stone, and was not the usual dirt path found in African villages. Before she could dwell on this oddity, Helene entered the outskirts of the town.

The village puzzled her even more. First came a belt of thatched native huts, the small dingy kind found throughout Africa, but these huts halted at the edge of a tall stone wall. The wall gave evidence of having been built long decades before, and though it remained generally strong and imposing, it was cracked and falling into disrepair in places.

The road went through a wide, arched gateway set in the wall and entered a second or inner city. Helene

could not suppress a cry of surprise at the sight which greeted her. Within the wall, lay a totally different type of community, a well laid out city of square stone buildings. The structures were simple in design, but these solidly built rock houses were a unique and astounding sight to find in the heart of primitive Africa.

This was some ancient fortress city, built by long dead hands, Helene could easily see. It was apparent many of the structures were deserted, and she was impressed by the absence of any signs of life on the streets. Helene's inspection was cut short, however, for Basru marched her to a large building, and rapped on the carved door.

Basru averted his eyes and bowed low when the broad door swung open. With misgiving, Helene looked through the open doorway. She was greeted with another totally unexpected shock. Seven young women, their skins almost as fair as Helene's, stood waiting upon the threshold. With their long dark hair and great black eyes, the women were like exquisite tropical blooms, exotic and fragile in their delicate beauty. They were oddly dressed, wearing silver breastplates and brief girdles, likewise heavy with silver. Over this scanty dress, each wore a long cape of brilliant yellow, fastened at the bare throat with a jeweled clasp.

One dark haired woman reached out a graceful hand in welcome. She spoke in a low musical voice and though many of the accents and words were unknown to Helene, Ki-Gor's mate understood the greeting to mean, "Enter, O bride to be of the mighty Zaa."

The proud red-haired girl, unsure of the fate which lay ahead, but feeling the company of the women in any event to be more desirable than association with the cruel Basru, shrugged her shoulders and stepped through the door. Helene turned and looked back at Basru. Both he and his men bowed low and withdrew, walking backwards, so that they still faced the young women respectfully. The big door swung closed, and Helene was guided down a long passage into a large comfortable room.

The jungle girl noted the rich furnishings of the room. Fine tapestries hung from the walls. Strangely fashioned pieces of furniture adorned with beautifully carved figures, indicated a quite high type of civilization. A low table of burnished red-tinted wood, inset with gold workings, stood in one corner. The fair young spokesman drew a small bench up to this table for Helene.

"Be seated, lovely one of the red hair," she said in her soft, warm voice, "and we will bring you food and drink."

Tired, hungry, thirsty, Helene needed no further urging. She sat down, and in a few minutes vessels of hand beaten silver were placed before her. The various dishes were delightfully flavored, and acquainted though she was with the world's finest foods, Helene had never tasted more exquisite cookery. She ate ravenously, and as the pangs of hunger were satisfied, her spirits rose.

The women departed after serving Helene, leaving her to her own devices. She studied the odd furnishings for a

time and then lay down on a couch to rest. She fell into a deep sleep and awakened only on the return of the women.

"Tell us your name," the dark haired spokesman said, after Helene had rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked inquiringly at the smiling faces.

"Helene," answered the jungle girl.

"Helene. Helene," the girl pronounced in her odd accents. "It is an unusual name, one I have not heard before, but I like it. I am known as Rannee."

"Who are you?" Helene asked in a puzzled voice.

"We are handmaidens of the High Priestess of Zaa."

Helene's face showed clearly she did not understand. "Yes, but who is Zaa?"

There was a touch of awe and fear in Rannee's face as she replied, "Zaa is the all-powerful god of my people, the great Serpent God. Surely you jest when you say you do not know of Zaa."

Helene shook her head slowly. It was difficult to believe that people as apparently civilized as these had such a primitive religion, but she had no opportunity to pursue the matter further, because Rannee now beckoned her to follow.

Helene rose and accompanied the seven girls down a stone passage and into a large, oval room.

The walls floor and ceiling of the room were of glistening black stone, so dark and shining she could see herself mirrored in it. Set in the exact center of the room was a rectangular pool of gleaming white marble. Steps led down into the pool, and from gaping mouths of odd figureheads set in each corner of the pool poured crystal-clear streams of water.

Rannee pointed to the inviting pool, saying to Helene, "It is the hour for your first ceremonial bath of purification."

The unexpected splendor and luxury of the gleaming black room took Helene aback. The unrealness of this scene set in the heart of a dense, primitive jungle fastness overwhelmed and confused her, and she gave small attention to the meaning of this ceremonial. In her disturbed state of mind, she hardly cared in any case. She offered no objection, therefore, when Rannee came forward and gently aided her to slip out of the leopard skin brassiere and breechclout.

Helene walked down the white steps into the clear water, shivering with pleasure as the refreshing coolness slipped up to cover her body. She bathed hurriedly, paying little attention to her quiet audience. The pleasant luxury of the bath, the feel of the water on her smooth, young body, soothed and rested Helene. Reluctantly, at last, she emerged from the pool. The handmaidens waiting to dress her exclaimed admiringly at the radiant beauty of her graceful form, and Rannee murmured in deepest sincerity, "You are very lovely, Helene, you will be the most beautiful bride taken in my memory by the great god Zaa."

Helene, though not unpleased by the compliment, was disturbed at its implications. But before she could speak,

Rannee called out to her sisters and two of them came with woven towels and care fully dried the jungle girl. Next they brought silver flasks containing rare and exquisite scents which they applied. Rannee herself put breastplates delicately fashioned from gold and gleaming with rare gems on Helene, and fastened about the jungle girl's shapely hips a girdle of worked gold likewise resplendent with jewels. About Helene's shoulders was thrown a cape of purest white, exceedingly soft and fine to the touch. Small gold sandals were placed on her feet.

The seven handmaidens drew back to survey their handiwork, and their faces amply reflected the pleasure and admiration with which they regarded the red haired girl. Helene, in returning the looks of the handmaidens, found it hard to believe these fair, gentle women were preparing her as some sort of sacrifice or offering to this Serpent God they worshipped.

For a moment, she felt the urge to tear the soft white cape from her shoulders and throw it at their feet, and offer resistance to these superstitious fools. But the memory of her beloved Ki-Gor going to his death came back to her, and a black despair laid hold of her heart.

What did it matter what became of her, she thought. There was no life for her without Ki-Gor and if these odd people meant to send her to her death, then perhaps all was for the best. Ki-Gor's arms would never hold her again, nor would she ever again hear his teasing, laughing voice. Life held no attraction. What was the sense of resisting.

Helene was escorted back down the stone passages and into a square high ceilinged room. It was an outside room, but the windows were small and placed high up on the walls, well beyond her reach. The afternoon sun filtered through these small openings softly illuminating the rich, but ancient, interior.

Rannee and her companions left Helene to her thoughts. The despondent girl, overcome by her grief, now that the dreadful shock of recent events had abated and her mind again functioned, threw herself on a couch and sobbed bitterly. She resolved in her unhappiness to openly welcome whatever means of death the snake people planned for her.

Helene was subjected for the next two days to the same quiet ritual. The seven women, always together, brought her superb meals and saw to her comfort, disturbing her little, except to insist on the luxurious bath taken in the great black room. It was midmorning the fourth day that the dark haired girls came to summon Helene, and Rannee, their spokesman, said with suppressed excitement, "You have completed the formal ceremony of purification and the time has come for you to enter the temple and be presented to Dian, High Priestess of Zaa."

The occasion, which obviously excited the handmaidens, stirred no emotion in Helene. Without objection, she rose and followed them out through the wide doorway to the flagstone street, where they turned their footsteps east. The warm morning sun emphasized the extreme age of the village, and although

there was an impressive beauty to the place, Helene felt a sense of death and evil, an indefinable atmosphere of decay over everything. This was a place out of the past, she thought, a pale remnant of a long-dead civilizations, a decadent holdover forgotten by time.

Few people were about as the party wound through the eerie, deserted streets toward a vast stone structure that rose in the center of the village. The vast building was impressive in size, but the most striking feature was its complete ugliness. Everything about it was too heavy, too big. The tremendous stone columns which jutted up to support the heavy roof were bulbous, obscenely huge.

Helene walked across the flagstone courtyard and mounted the broad, worn steps. Through the open doors of the temple, she looked into the tomblike interior, and from the dense gloom, broken only by the faint light of flickering torches, there rolled out an intangible sense of evil. The red haired girl drew her white cloak more closely about her, took a deep breath and crossed the portals into the inner dimness.

Helene's attention was drawn as though by a magnet to a great yellow square of stone placed in the center of the temple. This flat slab, set on a dais of black marble, sent a chill over the red haired girl; this, she knew, was the sacrificial stone of the pagan temple. The uneven light of the sputtering torches revealed long lines of squat, round, stone chairs extended along the right and left sides of the temple, facing the yellow altar of the Serpent God.

The sound of a heavy gong reverberated ominously as Helene neared the rock slab. When the waves of sound from the gong fell away, the shrill, high chanting of women's voices seeped into the temple. The thin, sing-song notes came nearer, steadily growing in intensity, until the pagan chant filled the air with its weird pulsation.

A faint radiance wavered in the darkness behind the great stone. The baleful fluorescence burned more brightly, until in a sudden burst of light, a double file of torchbearers, walking in slow, measured step, appeared through an arched doorway at the front of the temple. Holding the fiercely burning torches high, the two files of chanting handmaidens split, one going to the left, and one to the right of the smooth, glistening stone altar slab.

Helene watched the rapt, intent faces of the singers, white and unreal above their yellow capes. Her eyes were drawn back with resistless attraction to the massive rock, which in her fancy, appeared to glow dully at first, but with increasing intensity as the long seconds dragged by. Helene shook her head and lifted her eyes by sheer force of will from the hateful, inanimate stone.

The singing abruptly ceased. The curious chant did not reach a climax of any kind before halting, nor did it fall away softly; instead, the voices rose in full volume at one breath, and at the next were absolutely stilled. Silence, eerie and startling in its suddenness, burst over the huge temple like a thunderclap.

Helene's eyes followed those of the torchbearers to the door. A dark-haired, fullbreasted woman, a woman of incredible, burning beauty, stepped forward into the center of the light. Her cape was flung back over her bare shoulders, revealing the exquisite curves of her firm, lithe body. All attention focused on this magnetically beautiful woman as she moved with liquid, feline grace toward the altar.

Rannee, who had stood quietly all the while, now bowed deeply, saying, "Hail, O All-Powerful. Dian, High Priestess of the Mighty Zaa. As the ancient writs prescribe, we bring before you the chosen one, whom Zaa will take into himself at the Festival of the Seventh Moon."

The High Priestess looked directly at Helene during this formal speech. Then as Rannee finished speaking, Dian raised her right arm high, and lifted her eyes toward the shadowy gloom which enfolded the high ceiling of the temple. Her lips moved soundlessly in this ancient rite of accepting Zaa's bride-to-be into the protection of the temple.

Helene studied in this interval the haughty, barbaric figure of the High Priestess. Dian stood during the ritual with head thrown back, dark eyes half-closed, her body taut with emotion. Her raised arm, both commanding and beseeching, was encircled at the wrist with a bracelet wrought in the likeness of a coiled serpent. Dian's firm, full breasts were cupped by loose, revealing gold coils, cleverly encrusted with green gems. The brief, jeweled girdle she wore was made up of the same green stones worked into the gold.

It was the woman's face, however, that most attracted Helene's attention. It was a cruel, exotic face. The white, smooth skin was doubly-fair set as it was against the cloud of raven hair. The forehead was high, and the lips full, scarlet, and sensuous. Dian's firm chin and strong cheekbones clearly were those of one born to command. But the eyes of the High Priestess were her most dominant feature, for they were large, dark, burning pools, so black as to be almost luminous, so charged with inner fire they were electric in their intensity.

Dian concluded at length the initial part of the ritual and roused from the near hypnotic spell, in which she had communed with Zaa. She addressed Rannee and the handmaidens, saying throatily, "Zaa will be pleased with his people for bringing him this fair one. You have handled your trust well, and I bid you welcome now into the sacred inner portals of the temple."

The handmaidens who had cared for Helene the past three days bowed deeply, and the weird chant of the torchbearers was resumed. The High Priestess advanced around the stone altar to within arm's reach of Helene. Behind her came a young girl bearing in extended hands an ornate ivory box. Dian spoke again in a soft undertone, and because of her nearness, Helene could hear many of the words, but they were in a strange tongue, some forgotten language reserved now by these people only for their formal ceremonies. When the speech was ended, Dian turned and opened the small box held by the girl,

and lifted out a slender, gold headband, set with rubies.

The High Priestess placed this slender band on Helene's head, stepped back one pace, made a mystic symbol with her hand, and after one last glance at the jungle girl with those intense, glowing eyes, said, "The temple now receives you, O Promised of Zaa!" Rannee placed a hand on Helene's arm at these words and urged her forward after the retreating figure of the High Priestess. The chanting handmaidens fell in behind Helene, filing after her toward the archway beyond the altar.

Helene had the look of a sleepwalker as she went through the door. The incredible events which had piled up in her life, one on another, in such a short span of time had dazed and shaken her. The world was suddenly too grotesque to seem real. Her pale face reflected a soul weariness as she advanced half-bravely, half-unbelieving, into the musty, gloomy inner sanctum of the temple.

V. - The Mysterious Warrior

Ki-Gor balanced the black arrow of the Serpent God in his right hand. He stared long and thoughtfully at this ominous missile which had spread fear and consternation among the natives. His eyes traced and retraced the writhing serpent carved about the arrow's polished, black shaft. The Jungle Lord turned a thoughtful gaze on Wabumaa, the chief. The laughter and happiness were gone out of the fat, good-natured native, for the slim arrow had wrought a fearful change in Wabumaa. The man's color was a sickly yellow, and his plump jowls trembled as he nervously sought to moisten dry lips with his tongue.

"You mean your two strongest warriors will be sent as a sacrifice to the Serpent God, merely because someone shoots a black arrow into your village," Ki-Gor asked in an incredulous voice, finding it difficult to comprehend the abject submission of the tribesmen to such tyranny.

"Aye, I dare not do otherwise," the chief said fearfully. "A tribe to the north of us tried once to revolt against this old, old custom, and the people of the Serpent God came with spear and fire and wiped them out."

Never had Ki-Gor brooked arbitrary action or words from any man, so there was scornful anger in his voice as he snapped, "You have many strong, young men in your tribe! It is hard to understand warriors who won't battle for their rights."

The disturbed black man shook his head helplessly. "We are a peaceful people and fighting is not our calling. For many generations before us, our fathers followed the custom of sending the required two men." Wabumaa saw there was still no understanding in Ki-Gor's stern face, so pointing for emphasis to an unhappy group of his people standing nearby, he declared with finality, "Is it not better these two should be given up that the rest of us may live in peace? Resistance to the Serpent God would mean the destruction of all my people. Aye, all this was settled and

determined long ago by my fathers."

Clearly the chief had no thought of resisting the Serpent God's summons, so Ki-Gor asked how often the sacrifice was required.

"Always at this season," was the thickly muttered reply. "Always when the moon grows swollen and heavy with the approach of the great rains, this summons comes from the hated Serpent God."

Tembu George, who had shouldered his way up in time to hear part of the conversation, questioned, "Where do these snake people live, and what sort of rites do they hold?"

"I don't know," Wabumaa answered. "The two men must go out alone and unarmed along a trail to the north. It is taboo for us to go into that region. What happens to them I don't know, but none has ever returned."

Ki-Gor toyed with the arrow, while his mind weighed a desperate plan. He felt certain the serpent worshippers were the marauders he sought. It was typical of him to seek direct action, heedless of overwhelming odds and danger. A grievous wrong had been done him by these people, his mind darkened by a cowardly blow, his wife stolen, and here he found further evidence of long-standing crimes against these submissive natives.

The Jungle Lord's voice was as deliberate as though he inquired about the weather when he asked calmly, "You would not object if some one took the place of one of the men you must send to the Serpent God?"

This soft-spoken remark could have had no more stunning effect on the fat native if it had been a thunderclap of sound. Bewilderment and disbelief crowded into Wabumaa's face.

"No one has ever made an offer of that kind," he said, and then as the rising wails and laments of his tribesmen fell on his ears, he hurriedly added, "but it would make no difference to the Serpent people that I can see."

The big Masai Chieftain, Tembu George, turned and scrutinized the Jungle Lord closely, the significance of the white man's statement slowly dawned on him, and a gleam of admiration came into the massive fighting man's eyes.

"Then I will replace one of the victims!" the Jungle Lord declared.

The fat chief felt the white man certainly was mad to make such an offer, but it was with regret in his voice that he pointed out the proposal was impossible in Ki-Gor's case. "I do not believe the snake people would accept you because your skin is fair. They would think it was a trick and would know you were not my tribesman. If you were a native, I do not think it would matter to them."

This objection had not occurred to Ki-Gor. As he frowned, and cast about for a solution, Tembu George broke in to agree with the chief.

"That's right. White men are scarce in this region and I don't believe those snake worshippers would take kindly to your appearance."

The big warrior paused a moment, and glancing out of the corner of his eye

at Ki-Gor, advanced another suggestion. "They would find nothing suspicious in my looks, so I will go."

"Yes, yes, that's true," the chief was quick to urge, happy to think one of these foolhardy men would voluntarily save the life of one of his tribesmen.

There was a faint smile on Ki-Gor's lips when he looked at Tembu George, an expression of pleasure at the loyalty and courage of his friend.

"You may go if you like, my young lion, but you do not get rid of me quite so easily," Ki-Gor chuckled meaningly. "Give me a few hours' time and the Serpent God himself will swear we are twin brothers."

For the first time in many days, Ki-Gor laughed heartily. He slapped Tembu George on the shoulder, turned on his heel and strode away, his booming laughter startling the mourning natives. Ki-Gor heard their laments change to shouts of happiness and admiration behind him when their chief announced the two strangers would offer themselves up as a sacrifice to the Serpent God.

After searching through the jungle several hours, Ki-Gor returned to the village. He carried a leaf-wrapped bundle containing various herbs and plants, which he immediately placed in a large urn. The Jungle Lord filled the urn with water and placed it among hot coals to boil. He squatted by the mixture, stirring and watching it carefully, until tests convinced him it was properly done.

He then cooled the concoction and carried it into a hut with him. After a long while, a big figure loomed in the doorway of the hut. It was Ki-Gor, but it was a drastically changed Ki-Gor. Where a tall, superbly muscled white man had entered the thatched abode, a black man came out whose ebony skin glistened in the sun. The long, blond hair was replaced by a close-cropped black head of hair, stiff and slightly kinky.

The altered Jungle Lord strode through the village seeking Tembu George. The gleaming, velvety black of his skin accentuated Ki-Gor's tremendous muscular development. His freshly oiled skin shone in the light, revealing in every detail the play of the steely muscles along his massive frame. Natives turned to gape at the strange warrior walking so confidently through their village, wondering at the identity of this awesome black fighting man.

Lounging idly near the central campfire, Tembu George noticed with interest the approach of the big native buck. He watched with good humor the swagger of the native, smiling to himself at this affectation, but in no way resenting it, because as a chieftain of real fighting men, he well understood the overdose of pride and self- satisfaction experienced by many young warriors. He did not recognize Ki-Gor, and little knew that this swagger was part of a show being put on for his benefit.

With elaborate indifference to Tembu George and the staring groups of natives, the Jungle Lord stooped and picked up a charred piece of wood from the edge of the fire. He walked casually to the lone tree that stood nearby, the same tree in which the black arrow had

been embedded, and reached up to mark three black crosses on the trunk. Standing back, he surveyed the three charcoal crosses placed one beneath the other at intervals of a foot. In the same casual manner, Ki-Gor strode a few steps to where two bows with partially filled quivers had been left by returning hunters.

"Would you risk embarrassment by matching your skill with the bow against mine!" Ki-Gor barked suddenly at Tembu George in a loud, rough voice. This display of arrogant self-confidence by the strange black man aroused a momentary flash of anger in Tembu George. Considering the suggested contest, however, the Masai chieftain, conscious of his own ability with the bow, regained his good humor, thinking it would be a good lesson to teach this upstart giant some manners. He heaved his muscled bulk up and walked toward the strange warrior. Hardly looking at his friend, Ki-Gor pitched a bow and three arrows to Tembu George.

Ki-Gor restrained his laughter with difficulty, and half turning his back to the Masai leader, he barked again in the assumed harsh voice. "Three arrows apiece, making one shot for each cross. You may shoot first."

It would be a pleasure to shatter the studied indifference of the big native, Tembu George thought, so without a word, he fitted an arrow to the bow and raised it easily, almost carelessly. The bowstring twanged and like a gleam of light the arrow sped to the top cross mark. There was a crack of sound and the arrow dug into the tree trunk. A cry of approval went up from the watching natives. The arrow was embedded not half an inch from the exact center of the cross.

Outwardly solemn, but quite pleased with himself, Tembu George lowered the bow. "Let the swaggering buck beat that," he said to himself. But before he had an opportunity to really enjoy his pride of marksmanship, he heard the big fellow say, "Would you like to try that shot over? It is so wide, perhaps your foot slipped."

"That shot stands! Pay more attention to the contest, and less to the wagging of your tongue," the Masai Chieftain growled, unable to restrain his anger this time.

"I have no desire to show you up, old man, if you are not at your best," proclaimed the delighted Ki-Gor, "so if you prefer, we can forget the contest."

"Stop your loud gabbing and get on with it!" roared the now infuriated Tembu George.

Having never yet deigned to look straight at his Masai comrade, the Jungle Lord sighed audibly, shrugged his shoulders, and raised the bow in one smooth motion, let fly an arrow. The arrow struck the tree so hard the impact cracked like a pistol shot. A gasp went up from the onlookers. The barked shaft was driven deep into the exact center of the cross.

The Jungle Lord pursed his lips, and squatted native fashion on the ground, apparently deeply interested in his big toe. It was all he could do to suppress the gale of laughter that threatened to

burst from his throat.

The heavy brows of the Masai leader touched in a deep frown. It was clear this upstart was not to be taken lightly, so Tembu George dropped his casual air, and tensely prepared for the second shot. He would show him this time something about Masai marksmanship. Perhaps the fellow's first shot was merely a lucky one anyway. The massive Negro aimed with great care, and then with exacting skill released the barb. Delighted cries went up. The arrow vibrated precisely in the center of the second cross mark.

"Well, that slight wind helped right your aim this time," declared Ki- Gor, showing only casual interest in the accuracy of the shot. He took slightly longer aim himself this time and then sent his arrow flashing at the mark. The superhuman skill of the Jungle Lord was never better shown, for his arrow split the shaft of Tembu George's barb cleanly, and sent the pieces flying.

He turned a quick glance at the face of the Masai Chieftain, and seeing the consternation in the big man's expression, he was unable to control himself any longer. He shouted with delight, slapping his thighs and laughing until the tears came.

This display of poor sportsmanship on the part of his rival brought Tembu George up short, his mouth open to deliver a challenge. Then as he listened to the familiar tone of that storm of guffaws, he stared in bewilderment at his black foe, hardly knowing what to believe.

A sheepish grin suddenly appeared on Tembu George's face as he comprehended the joke played on him. "Ki-Gor, I should shoot you with this last arrow. How on earth did you rig yourself up like that? You look more like a native than those fellows standing over there." The massive Negro joined Ki-Gor in the laugh had at his expense.

Now Ki-Gor drew Tembu George aside, and explained his plan to enter the realm of the Serpent God. The two men would probably be facing certain death, and they would have no means of protection for Wabumaa had warned them they must go forth completely unarmed, they were to travel straight along the designated path to the east until met by warriors of the Serpent God. Ki-Gor warned Tembu George not to resist no matter what provocation was offered. The two men must bide their time for the one lone chance when they might have an opportunity to either free Helene, or if it were too late for that, at least to avenge her.

The Masai warriors were called in and the plan explained to them. They were unhappy at the prospect of being left behind, and argued long to be allowed to go. When they finally understood this was impossible, they made a counter-proposal agreed to by Tembu George. The fierce fighting men exacted the promise from their leader that a clear trail he left for them to follow. The idea of violating the taboo district observed by the local natives in no way disturbed them. These great warriors would fight the devil himself if need be to aid either the White Lord of the jungle or their chieftain.

It was agreed the Masai would follow after an interval of a day, and using their own discretion, would decide on some feasible plan to aid in rescuing Helene. The wounded warrior would be left in the village, and if by the time he recovered, the others had not returned, then he would go downriver and gather the full forces of the Masai nation. This stern people brooked no insult or injury, and as surely as night follows day, if it became necessary, long files of grim Masai warriors would seek out the snake people and exact full vengeance.

The fat, little chief waddled up to warn Ki-Gor it was time to depart. Without ceremony, the two uncommonly hale and hearty victims rose and strode after the plump native. He led them into the jungle a distance and pointed out the trail they were to follow.

He pressed the black arrow into Ki-Gor's hands. "It is necessary to take this dreaded thing with you," he muttered.

Wabumaa glanced hastily at the two men with a mixture of admiration and sorrow. He gulped in an unsuccessful search for words, and his eyes turned fearfully down the shadowy trail which lay ahead of these two madmen. A tremor of fright ran over the fat chief and he turned and ran back toward the safety of his village.

VI. - A Battle for Life

THE TWO MEN spoke little as they traveled the narrow choked trail. Their minds were occupied with the dangers ahead, but despite, those dangers, their eagerness to match wits and strength against warriors of the Serpent God made it necessary for them repeatedly to slacken pace. It would be unwise to appear to invite the coming ordeal, so the two men played the role of frightened and none-too-anxious sacrifices.

The trail bored an uneven way through the wild and overgrown jungle. Great trees interlaced their branches tightly overhead, cutting off any sight of the sky. Twisted vines, ranging in breadth from the size of a man's waist to slender threads, twisted and clung, in an endless, choking battle for survival. Ki-Gor preceded Tembu George along this dank, sunless route, when suddenly on rounding a sharp turn in the trail, they confronted a group of heavily armed warriors.

Ki-Gor halted, and faced the warriors in silence. These men, he knew, were guards sent to escort the cringing natives, whom he and Tembu George had replaced. With an air of apparent resignation, the Jungle Lord held out the black arrow to the flat-nosed, ape-like, black man in command of the warriors. The native advanced with a heavy, splay- footed gait, his hard face sneering at these sheep who came so meekly to be slaughtered, and accepted the proffered arrow.

He wasted no words on his captives, merely calling out, "Come! Don't stand there like crippled monkeys, the trail ahead is long."

The group set off immediately, with Ki-Gor and Tembu George sandwiched in the center of the file of warriors. It was a long journey, requiring the better part

of four days, with most of the ground covered at a dogtrot. At no time were the captives bound or mistreated, but a careful watch always was kept on them.

It was a weary, travel-worn party that struggled out of the smothering jungle in the late afternoon onto the beach of a sparkling, blue lake. The warriors dragged a long canoe from its place of concealment in the undergrowth, and slipped it into the clear water.

The Jungle Lord's eyes narrowed coldly when he saw the canoe. The fanged serpent carved on the prow made him bristle instinctively. With one broad hand he rubbed his cropped head, struggling to break through the gate which barred his memory. Despite the careful, detailed outline given Ki-Gor by Tembu George, the past remained sealed in the inner recesses of his mind. He strove constantly to break this imprisonment of his memory, seeking especially to conjure up the faces of those responsible for his present troubles.

The sight of the serpent figurehead moved him deeply, bringing almost within reach the image of a man he felt was the one who tried to kill him. He remembered vaguely a loud, arrogant voice associated with uneasy shifting eyes, but he could not adequately visualize the man or the circumstances. Ki-Gor felt somehow he would recognize this key figure if only he could come face to face with him.

A large island formed a shimmering splash of green far out on the lake. The ape-like black leader hurried his captives into the canoe and set course for the island. With the goal of his search in sight, Ki-Gor could not help thinking how tremendous a gamble this venture was, and he felt a twinge of regret that Tembu George was involved in the dangerous undertaking out of friendship for him. Tembu George, however, was certainly no figure to invite concern for he sat without an apparent worry in the world, stolidly gazing at the rapidly approaching island much like a bored tourist on a boat ride.

The canoe reached the island with a final burst of speed and darted into the small harbor. Over a score of natives were busy on the bank, and they gathered about the canoe when it beached, turning curious eyes on huge Ki-Gor and Tembu George.

"These two look better than the usual run of cattle you bring back from Wabumaa," an onlooker said in a matter-of-fact voice to the guard leader.

The ugly warrior replied with disgust, "These two are merely larger than the usual yield from that tribe of jackals. These fellows are as meek and mild as all the rest, and I doubt their performance will add anything to the Festival of the Seventh Moon."

Tembu George narrowly watched Ki-Gor, half expecting the Jungle Lord to throw off his air of resignation and make a sudden break for freedom, now that they had entered the realm of the Serpent God. Ki- Gor realized, however, any move on his part would be valueless until he knew exactly how to search

out the captive jungle girl, so he let himself be herded along the same cobbled road over which Helene had passed. He experienced Helene's surprise when he passed from the outer village of thatched huts into the strange, deserted, inner city, but to his captors he evinced no flicker of interest.

The file of natives threaded its way through the silent streets to a lone, stone building, different from the rest only because it was more formidably constructed. The Jungle Lord and Tembu George were taken down a long flight of stairs, and through groaning, age-blackened timber doors. The doors opened on a low-ceilinged passageway which sloped down sharply to a second timber barrier. Two stolid warriors stood guard before the heavy door, and on the approach of the captives, they silently lifted the bar and the prisoners were impatiently pushed into a darkened room.

Ki-Gor was instantly alert as the door closed behind him. His vision adjusted itself with catlike swiftness to the semi-darkness. He saw eight natives bunched together on the far side of the rectangular room. He recognized immediately in their listlessness the air of men who live without hope. These, then, were more unfortunates sacrificed by their tribes to appease the Serpent God.

The strong, muscular natives were fine looking specimens, quite evidently the picked men of their individual tribes. A surge of anger went through the Jungle Lord at the thought of numberless men like these cruelly and supinely sacrificed by their tribes as tribute to the Serpent God.

Ki-Gor and Tembu George moved forward and joined the natives, being quickly and easily accepted by this group brought together in a common misfortune. The eight men, Ki-Gor learned, had arrived in pairs that same day. Apparently the black arrows were delivered on a carefully planned schedule, so the victims would arrive at approximately the same time. The conversation of the moody natives soon died away, and rose again only at the scuffling of feet outside the door, heralding the approach of further victims.

When the door clicked open, two more figures were pushed into the damp room. Ki-Gor looked at the two newcomers who stood at the door, muttering nervously while they strove to adjust their eyes to the darkness. One native was average size, well built, but in no regard unusual, but the other man was of tremendous bulk. This giant Negro was one of the most massive black men Ki-Gor had ever seen. He was almost neckless, with smooth shaven bullet head set close on great sloping shoulders. His arms, as thick, hairy and muscled as a gorilla's, were abnormally long. The man's trunk, grotesquely big, was supported by correspondingly large and muscular legs.

A greeting was called out to the newcomers, and reassured that the nameless horror of the Serpent God was not yet to greet them, the two warriors advanced. The smaller man was obviously happy to find the company of his kind, but to, all appearances, his hulking companion did not share the same

sentiments. Ki-Gor sized the giant up accurately now when he could view him at close quarters. Although the fellow was a giant insofar as muscular development, his brain had in no way kept pace with the growth of his body.

Except for a low, animal cunning, the man gave no evidence of intelligence. Even in the face of death, the big native was a boastful bully, mean tempered, his evil little eyes looking for trouble. His loud bellows and brutish arrogance grew more insufferable as the minutes passed, and the mild dislike Ki-Gor first felt for the native grew by leaps and bounds.

Ki-Gor in no way was intimidated by the black man's size, for fear had no part in the Jungle Lord's being. Except for a reluctance to create a disturbance which would bring the guards down upon all the natives, he would have immediately crossed the warrior. He held himself in check, however, until one final act of the overbearing bully was too much to swallow.

The occasion was the bringing of food to the prisoners. Guards opened the door and placed inside a large vessel, which contained food for the entire group. A prisoner, out of courtesy to his fellows, stepped forward and picked up the vessel, intending to place it in the center of the group for all to share. As the man bent to place the container on the floor, a brawny, hairy arm scuffed him aside and the hulking giant took possession of the food.

"I will eat first," he declared belligerently, "and when I am finished, you jackals can paw over the remains!"

An angry chorus burst from the natives at this gross display of arrogance and greed. The giant black pulled the food closer, and growled contemptuously at the natives.

"If any of you have different ideas, let him come forward and we shall soon decide whose word is law here," rumbled the bully, swelling his vast chest, parading his hugeness before the others.

The natives realized crossing the man would plunge them into unarmed combat, and a hand-to-hand struggle with the gorilla-like creature, obviously, was an invitation to death. The cries of protest ceased, bringing an ugly smile to the giant's thick, animal lips. With considerable show, he prepared to reach one hand into the vessel, already pleased at the prospect of gorging himself before the hungry eyes of the others.

The pawlike hand moved down to select a piece of meat, but was halted in midair by Ki-Gor's cold, steel-hard voice. "I would not touch that food, if I were you!"

"Eh," grunted the black man, his evil, little, red-flecked eyes peering up in surprise at this implied opposition.

"We will all share alike here, and furthermore, I have heard enough of your blustering." The Jungle Lord's steady voice lashed out again. "Either you will stop acting like an animal, or I will see that you are given the treatment due one."

When the meaning of this statement

trickled into the slow mind of the brutish native, he swept the food vessel aside with a slap of his hand. Rage and contempt boiled up in his face to hideously twist his flat, oily features. He drew his lips back in a sneer, revealing uneven, yellow tusks, and a driblet of saliva slipped down the corners of his mouth. The elephantine native drew to his full height, swaying slowly as anger pulsed through him.

The figure of the black man, grotesque and inhuman in the shadowy light, completely dwarfed Ki-Gor. The watching natives gave the calm, quiet Jungle Lord little chance before the giant and they were spellbound at his deliberate stance. Tembu George alone among them realized Ki-Gor's deceptive calm masked a dreadful fury, volcanic and terrible once unleashed. The natives fell back, leaving the two antagonists to face each other. Still Ki-Gor stood there, every muscle in delicate balance, his steady eyes never leaving the big man's face.

"You dare challenge me, Brogar! You dare insult Brogar!" the giant bellowed. "You sniveling dango, you die for this!" he screamed, throwing his vast bulk forward in a headlong charge.

The Jungle Lord, alert for this move, flicked aside from the ponderous charge, and with the blasting power of a pile driver, struck the native's temple with the open palm of his right hand. The blow from that rock-hard hand, which would have felled most men, only jarred Brogar. The enraged black man smashed at Ki-Gor again, moving with an agility startling in a person of such mountainous proportions. He kept rushing Ki-Gor, striving to catch the smaller man in his flailing arms, but the Jungle Lord successfully evaded him. Ki-Gor was forced to retreat, but he dealt terrible, punishing blows for every step he gave ground.

Brogar was accustomed to crushing his smaller opponents without undue trouble, and this experience of being mauled by the evasive Jungle Lord sent him insane with blood lust. The giant warrior was terrible to behold as he beat his chest savagely, a stream of guttural, animal sounds poured from his frothing lips.

Flailing, clawing, rushing, he drove Ki-Gor back steadily into a corner of the room. The one thought in his mind was to box the nimble Jungle Lord up where he could get his hands on him, then he would show him what the hate of Brogar meant.

Ki-Gor realized he was being forced into an unfavorable position, and he put forth every trick he knew to turn and divert the raging giant. The white man knew he could not cope with the vast bulk of the warrior, once the opportunity to maneuver was gone. Brogar would not be diverted, though, and Ki-Gor was pushed back, inevitably back, until his back suddenly struck the cold stone of the wall.

This was the opportunity Brogar awaited. He spread his great arms wide, and bore forward to close with this puny mortal, who dared oppose him. Ki-Gor lashed three rocking blows at Brogar's exposed face, putting his full desperate

strength in a last ditch effort to break out of the trap. The giant wavered, halted, and then came on again, his tremendous paws smashing on Ki-Gor's head like sledge hammers. The Jungle Lord was torn from his feet by the shock and thrown to the floor. Brogar, screaming fiendishly, kicked Ki-Gor as he fell, sending him rolling.

When he went down and felt the cruel kicks, a black blinding rage poured over Ki-Gor. He changed in an instant from a calm, self- possessed man, fighting a deliberate battle, into a raging jungle killer. The uncontrollable fury that swept over Ki-Gor doubled and tripled his normally immense strength.

The amnesia previously caused by Basru's head blow, when Helene was abducted, had swept away much of his veneer of civilization; and now, rage and pain cut away every last vestige of civilized man. Ki-Gor was suddenly a jungle beast with the killer-madness on him, and the raging, primitive, savagery he exhibited made even the blood of the watching natives run cold.

The black giant leaped at Ki-Gor, straining with his thick fingers to capture the Jungle Lord's throat. But in vain did the huge black strain to hold Ki-Gor to the floor and throttle him. The flood of power exerted by the steel-hard muscles of the Jungle Lord was a resistless, terrifying force, nullifying and defeating the awesome strength of the native.

A small twinge of fear crept into the bully's heart as he found he could not control the writhing, demoniac Ki-Gor. The Jungle Lord forced the black warrior's choking handhold to loosen, slip and break. With a supreme effort, Ki-Gor drew his legs up under the smothering weight of the native, and catapulted them forward, plunging the big man off of him. Ki-Gor gained his feet in this interval like a leaping tongue of flame, and swept at the giant, utterly heedless of the punishing blow's dealt by the hulking warrior.

The leonine Ki-Gor dove straight into his foe, tearing and slashing with incredible speed and power. His face terrible with anger and a low, chilling snarl of hate sounded deep in his throat. The White Lord's lips were sheared back in an animal snarl, and his eyes spat flame.

The Jungle Lord was no longer a man battling only. He was a ruthless beast of prey intent on destruction, an irresistible fighting machine geared to tear and rend and kill. Essentially, this was the role nature had fitted him for, because from the earliest youth his life and safety depended entirely on his instinctive battle urge, on an ability to act quicker and with greater deadliness than the countless savage foes who hunted him.

The bewildered black warrior gave ground before Ki-Gor's fierce, unrelenting attack. The giant knew fear for the first time in his life. Never before had the tremendously powerful native had reason to fear defeat in any struggle. But a fear crept over him now not merely of being humbled by an adversary, but an actual fear of being killed. The warrior fought ever more wildly, his guard crumbling before the shattering blows dealt by Ki-Gor as the two men

grappled and strained, seeking always an opening which would bring decisive victory.

The natives, whose cause Ki-Gor championed, watched with excited delight as they saw the black giant waver and fall back before Ki-Gor. This sight of the Jungle Lord beating down the huge warrior was a totally unexpected turn of events. None of the prisoners, except Tembu George, had given the smaller man a chance, and for a time in the beginning, even the Masai chieftain looked with doubt on the outcome. The spectacle jerked the prisoners out of their silence as they loudly cried encouragement to Ki-Gor.

But Ki-Gor heard them not. He fought in a red haze which excluded all except the figure of his foe. He failed to hear also, the sudden clamor outside in the passageway, where the guards, aroused by the rising din made by the prisoners, called for more men to put down the trouble.

The reinforced guards burst through the door and swept into the room to halt the disorder just as Ki-Gor landed a stunning blow. He struck with the hard outer ridge of his hand, and the giant black man reeled back. Before the brutish figure could recover, Ki-Gor moved in like a panther, and with an iron grip swung the huge black from his feet.

The immense weight would have torn loose the shoulder muscles of a lesser man, but the massive Jungle Lord easily lifted the great bulk overhead and then smashed it to the ground. The moment the bully hit the floor, Ki-Gor dived to finish him. He gave no heed to the figures swarming at him. His attention was focused exclusively on reaching the dazed giant before the man could struggle to his feet.

A score of hands clamped on Ki-Gor as he pounced at the native. Other guards grasped the huge black, who gave them no resistance. He was not eager to resume the combat. The men who attempted to control Ki-Gor though, had their hands full, but their numbers were sufficient to hold him. When his senses cleared, he reluctantly submitted and stood quietly.

The Jungle Lord looked about him, as his rage cooled, realizing only gradually what had taken place. He surveyed the battered visage of the giant with grim satisfaction, noting, however, the cold, baleful hate which shone in the native's eyes. The hurt bully would never forgive Ki-Gor, but this fact did not worry him. Ki-Gor was disturbed that his action might bring down punishment on the prisoners. He glanced regretfully to where they were lined up by the guards, and was reassured. The men's faces amply told him his humbling of the giant more than repaid them for any trouble which might ensue.

A sharp command rang out, and a sudden hush fell over the room. The guards stood stiffly erect as a commanding figure strode into the door. Ki-Gor's eyes widened in surprise at the newcomer. The man, obviously a person of rank and importance, was white.

He was an austere, middle-aged fellow, with severe, cold features. He was

oddly garbed, wearing over his bare chest a long scarlet cape, embroidered with a figure of a fanged serpent. His loins were swathed with a metallic cloth, yellow as gold, and buckled at his waist was a short broad sword. Silver sandals encased his feet, and he wore a gleaming silver helmet on his head.

The white warrior stared around the room, then motioned one of the guards to him to report on the disturbance. His dark eyes searched Ki- Gor and the giant black, noting they were not seriously injured. He gazed at them impersonally, as at cattle, pursing his thin lips in displeasure at the entire event.

The commanding white man turned with a sweep of his cape, after this inspection, and stalked to the door. Abruptly, he halted, and half turning, addressed the prisoners in clipped, emotionless words.

"You will shed blood enough tomorrow, you savages, without spilling each other's blood in such foolish personal grudges as this!"

With that ominous pronouncement, the cold, precise white man strode from the room, leaving the cruel torment of his meaning to torture the thoughts of the prisoners.

VII. - The Ritual of Flame

THE ETERNITY of suspense drew to an end for the prisoners. It was the first day of the Festival of the Seventh Moon, and their fate would soon be known. Uneasily, they waited.

Then the scarlet-robed white warrior came with the guards, four armed natives for each prisoner, and they were escorted individually from the cell. The guards took them out of the cool building into the bright sunlight. The procession of victims wound through the silent streets, past the great temple, to a long open stretch of ground which lay behind it.

Excited crowds of natives massed on each side held back by files of warriors standing shoulder to shoulder. The cleared strip was broken at regular intervals by what appeared to be barriers and obstructions of various kinds.

The prisoners had no opportunity to clearly view the field for they were hurried through the crowd and drawn up before a colorfully decorated stand containing several tiers of seats. The stand was located about the center of the field and a heavy guard of helmeted black warriors was stationed about it. The tiers of seats were packed with elegantly garbed men and women, and the eyes of the prisoners widened in surprise—every person in the stand was white skinned.

Ki-Gor looked at the scarlet and yellow robed people who stared disdainfully at the victims from their vantage point. These people then were the ruling class of this strange fortress city, a haughty, fairskinned handful who dominated hundreds of blacks on the island and made their baleful influence felt throughout the entire lake region.

He remembered the sprawling, overgrown outer city, jammed with crude, thatch huts and crowded with natives, and the inner city with its stone

houses, deserted and falling into disuse. The two cities told the story. These whites were the fading remnants of a once mighty people, a handful who maintained their rule through religious domination of the vast numbers of superstitious natives. His interest in the Serpent God deepened. He realized this small island buried in the inner fastnesses of the jungle held one of the many weird, unbelievable secrets of Africa.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, the Jungle Lord studied the faces of these strange, barbaric whites. A woman of striking beauty occupied a raised throne in the front rank of the stand. It was Dian, High Priestess of the Serpent God. Ranged on each side of her were the Handmaidens of Zaa, except at the place to the immediate right of Dian, where the pale, beautiful Helene sat.

Tembu George immediately recognized Helene, but he was separated by a great distance from Ki-Gor, and could not direct the Jungle Lord's attention to her. For his part, Ki-Gor's searching eyes had quickly singled out the red-haired, blue—eyed girl and noted how different she was from the other animated, interested spectators. Although dressed like the others, she seemed filled with sadness, withdrawn from the scene around her.

But though Ki-Gor's eyes paused long on Helene, he did not know her. Nor did he recognize the tall, hard native with the ever-shifting eyes who stood in front of the stand. It was Basru. The hatchetfaced warrior was reaping his first honor for the capture of Helene by being placed in charge of the personal guard of the High Priestess.

Helene's glance barely touched the prisoners. She had no interest in the proceedings, and sat pale and aloof, her thoughts turned inward. It would have been a miracle, in any case for her to recognize Ki-Gor even had she looked directly at him. He bore no resemblance to the beloved mate her memory touched on constantly, so altered was his appearance by the black, oiled skin and shortcropped hair. Helene would have known Tembu George instantly had she picked out his face from the mass of natives ranged before her.

The High Priestess rose to her feet and stared out over the multitude. She raised her right arm high and the roar of many voices fell away. The hushed silence was tense with expectancy; the crowd strained to hear the words of the High Priestess.

"I, Dian, High Priestess of Zaa, declare this day the opening of the Festival of the Seventh Moon, and do command my people to pay homage to the mighty Serpent God as proscribed by the ancient rites."

The roar of the crowd swept up in a flood of sound as the haughty priestess made this declaration, and then died away as the high pitched voice came again.

This time Dian spoke in a strange tongue, the words falling and rising in odd cadence, as she prayed to Zaa in the dead language of her forefathers. The moment the prayer was completed

the bedlam of noise broke from the throats of the hundreds of natives, continuing until a signal from the priestess. Dian looked now at the prisoners and addressed them.

"Subjects of the Outer Realm, you twelve are sent here by your respective peoples to do honor to the almighty Zaa.

"As unbelievers, only one among you is given the priceless opportunity through the Festival of the Seventh Moon to be received into the service of our mighty god.

"But this fortunate one—the only one of you who will live—must be the strongest, the fittest, and the greatest warrior. The blood of the others will atone for the sins of their people."

Dian paused as though to let her words sink into the minds of the prisoners. The unfortunate men, tense and trembling, looked uneasily at one another, wondering which would be the lone survivor of the festival. Anxiously, they strained to hear what the method of decision would be.

"The two who are most favored by Zaa will be determined through the Ritual of Flame," continued the High Priestess. "All twelve of you will compete. Between lanes of fire you will race the length of this field, passing through five obstacles which will test your courage, strength and skill."

As Dian halted dramatically, the milling crowd broke out in a bloodthirsty roar. This was the spectacle they wanted. They pressed to see how the prisoners reacted to the pronouncement of the High Priestess.

"One of the first two to cross the finish line will be the man whose life is spared," cried Dian. "Those who lag behind the two winners must die on the altar."

The prisoners were stunned by this harsh-cruel contest decreed for them. They wondered fearfully what the obstacles would be. And in the mind of each, the desire to live flamed up, and each resolved he must be one of those first two. They felt an instinctive, even though unwanted, fear and suspicion of each other, for every man was henceforth set against every other.

Ki-Gor and Tembu George alone remained undisturbed. These two ironnerved men willingly entered the realm of the Serpent God, and they were prepared to face any resulting dangers unflinchingly. It was obvious this packed field, with its countless warriors, offered no chance for escape, so the only alternative was to go on with the contest and hope for a further opportunity to rescue Helene.

The contestants were escorted down to the end of the field and lined up. Ki-Gor saw now the dangers they were to face. Two narrow ditches ten feet apart were dug the length of the field and were filled with a thick, black residue. The Jungle Lord's nostrils quickly identified the black substance as being principally oil. This oil would provide the flaming barriers to keep the men on the obstacle course.

The first obstacle was a stretch of earth set with knives, buried hilt down, so the irregularly placed blades angled

up to slash the legs of any runner who misjudged a step. Beyond this knife-sown area were three hurdles formed from spears. The hurdles were successively higher, and each row of spears was pointed to impale any man who failed to clear the jump.

Next lay an obstacle more dangerous than the first two. Five pairs of wooden posts were sunk in the ground, and chained to every post was a leopard. The chains on each pair of leopards permitted the animals almost to touch paws, when they strained forward, growling and fighting. Only a narrow, uncharted trail precisely between the pairs of leopards could be followed by the contestants with any hope of passing through safely.

A deep pit lay beyond the leopards, and it was impossible for Ki-Gor to see what danger awaited there. The final obstacle appeared to be a small ditch across the course, and he deduced it was filled with the same oily substance as the corridor lanes. It was likely a high flame barrier would be the final obstacle; and placed as it was at the end of the course, the flames would be hard for the tired and breathless natives to surmount.

The cruel mind that conceived this Ritual of Flame made certain the two winners were men not only of great physical prowess, but also men smiled on by luck and good fortune. Ki-Gor realized part of the twelve would never complete the course. He glanced down the lane of prisoners to place Tembu George, and he noted the hate-filled eyes of the giant Brogar in turn were searching him out. He understood the extent of the brutish warrior's hate, and resolved during the race to be watchful of the native.

The white warrior in charge of the prisoners shouted a command and all along the field, guards with burning torches ran forward to light the channels of flame which lined the course. The twin sheets of fire burst up, wavering yellow in the still air. The chained leopards screamed in an agony of fear at the fire, and a great roar went up from the watching crowd, lending a further barbaric note to the terrible scene.

Shouting above the noise, the white warrior told the prisoners the contest would begin the moment he lowered his sword. The twelve men, their dark skins pale with fear and stress, glued their eyes to the raised sword. Ki-Gor watched, too, his muscles tense, for he was anxious to get through the knife-strewn area before the full mass of men reached it. Twelve men fighting to outrun each other through that dangerous stretch meant several would be jostled into missteps and a fall would be fatal.

The short, broad sword glistened in the sun as the white warrior held it steady, and then with a shout, slashed it down, starting the contest.

The twelve men burst forward in a frenzied sprint. Twelve superb physical specimens strained every nerve and fiber to take the lead. Ki-Gor threw every ounce of strength into a powerful driving spurt, gaining speed like a startled hare. He edged slowly ahead, leading all except one figure, which

hung with him. He saw from the corner of his eye this companion who kept pace with him was Brogar.

The agility of the huge black man was astounding. His size made him a slow starter, but his tremendous strength pushed him forward at surprising speed once under way. The sharp blades glittered close at hand now, and Ki-Gor had no desire to enter the obstacle running shoulder to shoulder with Brogar.

Barriers of flame reared up to swallow the racing men. The tightly grouped natives surged close behind Ki-Gor, and the sound of their pounding feet urged him to greater effort. Entering the flaming walls, the men swept down the center of the course, striving to avoid the torturing heat and smoke. The first obstacle rose before them, the leaping flames gleaming on the waiting forest of blades.

This was the moment Ki-Gor awaited. All the great strength in his magnificent body exploded into his driving legs as he spurted ahead of the others. He veered to the burning wall on the right, running so close the flame pricked his skin with its darting red tongues. Through this stratagem, Ki-Gor placed himself out of reach of the cunning Brogar, escaping at the same time the danger of being trampled by the pack should he stumble or misstep.

The main body of natives gave him no notice as they held to the middle aisle. Heat seared over Ki-Gor and he fought an overwhelming urge to escape the torturing fire. His iron will kept him from wavering and the pain was forgotten, momentarily, as all his attention and concentration was required to avoid the wicked, blades that slashed up from the earth.

Ki-Gor had guessed the knives would be placed less thickly along the outer edge of the course than in the center. He was correct, but the field of gleaming blades was a tremendously formidable obstacle for a running man. The Jungle Lord called forth his greatest dexterity, and inviting death at each step, he threw himself over the cruel stretch in a dizzy, breathtaking gamble.

The massive White Lord of the jungle leaped free over the last row of knives at the same instant an agonized burst of screams filled the air. He knew without looking a native had gone down under the frenzied rush of the pack. Others, he knew, bore gaping leg wounds after jostling and fighting over the obstacle.

But the brutish giant had survived, for he swept into the lead now as Ki-Gor lost time turning back to the more endurable portion of the course. An excruciating hurt flared over Ki-Gor's dry, scorching body and it was impossible for him to stay so close to the flames. Two other natives besides Brogar passed him before he reached the center aisle. Clear of the knives, the Jungle Lord settled quickly into a dead run, straining to pass the three natives ahead of him.

His terrific pace carried him past the nearest straining native. He tried his utmost to close the gap to the next man,

but the warrior ran like a frightened deer, the dread thought of the Serpent God urging him to supreme heights. And the monstrous black figure of Brogar sped as though all the fiends of hell pursued him, crashing over the earth with gargantuan strides.

The Jungle Lord saw the second obstacle near, and discarded any idea of regaining the lead until it was passed. The obstacle was three successive hurdles, each higher than the last. The hurdles were formed of braced rows of spears, their points honed to needle sharpness.

The giant Brogar swept over the first bank of spears, pounded three steps and cleared the second, and then with a rush threw his bulk over the third hurdle. The warrior who tailed Brogar cleared the initial jump, stumbled, tore himself back to his feet, and awkwardly but successfully leaped the second hurdle. Ki-Gor was close on the native's trail, and realizing this, the man refused to allow himself time to regain balance. The warrior flung himself at the third and highest barrier, and completely off-gait, he spun up in a faltering jump. The man crashed with a scream on the spear points and hung there, the blood drenching down from his impaled body.

Ki-Gor cleared the second jump just as the warrior struck the spears, and his insides writhed at the cruel, mad scene. But it was too late to aid the dying man, and Brogar drew ever further ahead, so the Jungle Lord steeled himself and with a prodigious leap went over the final bank.

He ran now as he never ran before. The sight of the running giant acted as a whip-lash, beating new strength into his corded muscles. The hot, smoke-filled air sent a choke of pain over his chest at every laboring breath. Sweat drenched him, while the torturing flames burned him at the same time. But only one thought filled his mind: catch and pass Brogar.

And Ki-Gor's great body responded to his will. He gained steadily on the huge native. Ever faster he closed the gap. Then in amazement, he saw Brogar falter and come to a complete stop.

Suddenly, Ki-Gor understood. The big native faced the third obstacle and was afraid. The obstacle was, in truth, a sight to strike fear into the bravest of men. Ten leopards, chained opposite each other in pairs, had been driven insane by the scorching flames. The rearing, leaping beasts slashed and fought to break free, and their clawing bodies formed living barricades across the course.

Even the jungle-wise Ki-Gor was struck by the extreme peril ahead. He did not pause in his stride, however, but swung past Brogar into the hellish area. He knew the maddened beasts would strike at any moving object, but in their crazed state, he realized, the leopards would give no concentrated effort to bringing him down. If he could avoid their fearful, but aimless, writhings, he could pass through safely.

The White Lord burst between the first pair of leopards when one of the beasts was jerked back by its chain af-

ter a charge, leaving an open gap for passing through. He dove directly over the second pair, and the moment his feet struck the earth, he sprinted to the left, and hovering close to the wall of flame, circled behind the next raging beast.

When he reached the fourth pair, one of the leopards turned straight for him. The blood-chilling attack came with lightning swiftness. Ki- Gor saw the raging jaws yawn toward him as the animal leaped, and he threw himself backward. He struck the ground violently and slid, his head nearly reaching the flames before he pulled it away. The leopard seemed to poise over him in the air for a moment, and then it crashed back away from him, its neck almost broken. The chain around the beast's neck had checked it in mid-air.

Ki-Gor sprang up and past the leopard like a released arrow. Again he hugged the barrier of fire, and though one of the leopards in the final pair started for him, the flames held the animal back, and the Jungle Lord sped through safely.

He turned at the edge of the obstacle and looked back, curious about the progress of the others. An unbelievable sight met his eyes. All the natives still in the race crowded up to the far side of the obstacle, hesitating at entering the raging leopard den. As Ki-Gor watched, Brogar shoved two natives forward with a great push which committed them to continuing, and then the giant caught up another native in his huge paws like a club and sprang forward.

It happened too quickly for anyone to know what Brogar was about. He sent the first two natives in ahead to distract the attention of the leopards from him. But not satisfied with this protection, the brutish monster swung the third native in his arms to use as a shield if he were personally attacked.

The Jungle Lord was both angered and sickened by Brogar's cowardly, inhuman action. Ki-Gor was helpless to act now, but he resolved to repay the brutal warrior in full for this performance, and this time the bully would not escape the penalty as before.

Spurred by his anger, Ki-Gor threw himself forward to complete the course. He neared the fourth obstacle, which was a deep, square pit extending completely across the field, from one lane of fire to the other. The White Lord's puzzlement at what new horror now faced him grew as he raced toward the yawning pit. When he reached it and looked down, the shock of the scene was as great as he anticipated.

The floor of the pit crawled with hundreds of snakes. The cold, squirming bodies were of every size, shape and kind, twisting and slithering over each other in constant, uneasy motion. He saw at a glance the excavation contained both deadly and harmless species. Addition of the harmless serpents, he thought grimly, was probably the High Priestess' conception of good sportsmanship toward the prisoners.

No other action was open to him but to jump into the pit. His feet landed squarely on two scaly bodies, crushing them. Then began a fearful dance, as he

picked his way through the weaving pattern of snakes, leaping over the floor of the pit, taking advantage of every clear space. Time and again he barely avoided the fangs of the disturbed snakes. After an eternity, Ki-Gor reached the farther side of the obstacle.

He faced another problem now in getting out of the pit. Certainly, he had no wish to go back and attempt to run over that writhing pattern of death in order to gain momentum. A running leap was out of the question. The Jungle Lord gathered himself, and suddenly unleashing his strength, sprang up to catch the top of the pit wall. He fumbled at the soft turf, the earth crumbled in his grip and he fell back. Twice more he tried, only to fall. Worn by the exhausting ordeal, his strength was not at full ebb, but he took a great breath and bounded up the fourth time. One hand caught. Up, up, he pulled himself, while the sweat poured from his straining face. Without warning the bank crumbled, and he fell heavily. He lay still for a moment, and then when he started to rise, a cold, scaly body slipped over his legs. Ki- Gor fought down a wave of revulsion and cautiously raised his head to look at the snake. Relief flooded over him when he saw it was of a harmless species.

This experience lent him false strength, and with his next terrific effort, he managed a firm grip on the high bank and pulled himself to safety. Although he could hear the other contestants arriving at the obstacle behind him, the Jungle Lord did not permit himself a backward glance.

He went straight for the final barrier, a shimmering wall of flame rising to a height of over eight feet. His breath came in deep, laboring gasps, and his pace had fallen to a loping run. He came straight at the center of the burning hurdle, measuring the distance with his eyes. The Jungle Lord's indomitable will whipped his tired body erect, dragged up one last explosive burst of energy, and he vaulted. Ki-Gor arched up, slowed at the top of the leap, and then with a tremendous twist of his long body, jerked over the searing wall.

The shock of landing brought him to his hands and knees, and Ki-Gor's taut iron muscles trembled as he pulled his spent body up. He peered at the finish line through eyes, red and stinging from the smoke and heat. A score of guards were drawn up in wait for the survivors of the Ritual of Flame. At the sight of these guards, Ki-Gor stiffened, refusing them the pleasure of seeing him stagger with exhaustion.

He trotted across the finish mark, his tired body held proudly, no sign of the utter weariness he felt showing on his expressionless face. Four guards formed about him immediately and led him in front of the milling throng of natives to the stand where the High Priestess waited.

Dian's hypnotic black eyes, stirred with excitement of the cruel spectacle, flickered over the regal body of the Jungle Lord. Her breath came quickly through half parted red lips. She pulled herself up, and leaned forward and called to Ki-Gor.

"You have proved your prowess, barbarian! You have won the Ritual of the Flame!" she called in a voice husky with emotion. "There is yet one more test you must meet. Tonight in the temple you must fight and kill the warrior who ran second."

VIII. - To the Death

KI-GOR was taken from the field to a small stone room in the rear of the temple. He was not permitted to see the other contestants. His mind tortured itself with the question of who the man was he must kill.

If the man was Brogar, then he welcomed the combat. But suppose he had to face one of the natives toward whom he felt no enmity. And Tembu George! What if he was pitted against his stalwart friend.

He dropped into an exhausted sleep with these anxious thoughts on his mind. Ki-Gor blinked his eyes open hours later. The small cell lay darkened in the purple-black African night. The tiny slits high on the wall which served as windows drew his gaze. Outside where the swollen moon rose silver over the blackness of the jungle was freedom.

There were steps at the door, and Ki-Gor stood up to face the guards. He stepped silently into the long hall and followed the lead of two men bearing torches. He rubbed his left arm as he walked, massaging the stiffness from it. With a start, he suddenly realized the natural white of his skin showed through in a small place under the pressure of his fingers.

The black mixture with which he had coated his skin in a well-nigh perfect camouflage was ready to peel away. The protecting sheet of oil he had spread over his body was gone, and the terrific heat of the obstacle course had baked the texture off his body. He had not used a simple stain, because this formula showed him by a witchdoctor, achieved a more natural result and also could be taken off more easily.

The matter was pushed from Ki-Gor's mind when he stepped into the great temple. Hundreds of torches lit the massive expanse of stone, and except for a wide place about the sacrificial rock, every available space was jammed with chanting natives. The white skinned aristocrats occupied the rows of stone seats on each side of the altar.

Dian, High Priestess of Zaa, stood before the yellow altar, her arms thrown up in a beseeching gesture as she called upon the Serpent God to witness the faithfulness of his people and pour forth his bounty upon them.

Into this pagan scene came the dejected figures of the contestants who had survived the Ritual of Flame. Ki-Gor counted them as they passed into the temple. There were only five, and two of them were half- dragged by the guards, so badly cut and burned were they. Exactly half the natives had died on the diabolical obstacles.

The fourth man to enter was Brogar and the fifth was Tembu George. Both men had come through the ordeal unscathed. One of these two, the Jungle Lord knew, was the opponent he must

face.

At the entrance of the natives, Dian concluded her high-pitched prayer, and pointing to the altar, cried to waiting guards, "Draw back the sacred stones about the altar!"

Burly warriors sprang forward and hooked chains into iron rings set in the floor stones around the yellow rock-slab. With tremendous hauls, the guards pulled the hinged floor back, section by section, revealing a yawning pit which ran completely around the altar. The gaping six foot void which separated the sacrificial stone from the temple floor was bridged at only one point, where a narrow path was left to reach the rock.

A signal from Dian brought absolute quiet, and she spoke again to the Serpent God, saying, "O Mighty Zaa, we call upon you to send your spirit into the serpent of the pit to receive our sacrifices. We offer up these men with the hope you will be pleased, and will come among us again and lead us to renewed greatness."

Ki-Gor listened intently to this prayer of a dying race. The previous ritual was offered for all the snake people, white and black, but this particular plea was made actually on behalf of only the fairskinned aristocrats. The High Priestess called on Zaa to return in earthly form and rebuild the former power of her tribe.

"Your sword and helmet, your scarlet cape await your return. Come unto us again as the Great White Warrior who brought our forefathers into this country from beyond the endless waters."

Abruptly, Dian broke off the prayer. She paused in silence a moment, then commanded a helmeted warrior, "Make ready the two warriors. Zaa waits restlessly for the first sacrifice of the Festival."

The hatchet-faced Basru hastened to obey the High Priestess. He barked two orders. Ki-Gor's guards shoved him forward before the sacrificial stone. From the other side of the altar, guards brought his opponent. He stared narrowly at the man, and the tension in him relaxed. His foe was the hulking Brogar.

Basru spoke briefly to the two men, explaining what they were to do. They would fight on the flat top of the altar until one man was killed and cast into the pit. The winner would be accepted into the service of the Serpent God. Basru handed Brogar a knife and sent him over the narrow bridge and up on the yellow slab. The guard turned then, and his eyes shifted nervously over the Jungle Lord's face as he held out a knife. The two stared at each other for a long second, before Ki- Gor, unbidden, swung on his heel and crossed to the altar. Frowning, Basru, looked after him, and then, his face puzzled, he glanced to where Helene sat before walking away.

The bride-to-be of Zaa occupied a place of honor beside Dian in the front row of seats. Helene cringed at the ruthless barbarism of the spectacle about to be enacted. The High Priestess felt the redhaired girl's reaction, and a cruel smile played over her sensuous lips.

"I would advise you to watch, my

dear," she said tauntingly, "because the longer the two men fight, the longer you have to live."

Despite Helene's resignation to death, there was horror in her voice, as she gasped. "You mean I, too, will die tonight on the altar?"

Dian's burning eyes savored the girl's suffering. "Yes! Immediately after the other sacrifices are made. Zaa's bride is the last one he claims."

Helene looked involuntarily at the armed black men on the yellow rock. The smaller warrior crouched across from the giant, his finely chiseled profile contrasted with the big man's gross features. Helene's eyes widened at that familiar figure. Only Ki-Gor fought from that deadly, crouching stance—and yet, this man was black.

She strained forward, her heart beating wildly. All doubt was swept away. It was Ki-Gor, she knew. It was impossible because she saw him die, but somehow, some way, the man before her was Ki-Gor. A wild joy burst over her, fading as soon as it began, to be replaced by a gnawing fear he would be killed by the hulking giant.

The Jungle Lord, for his part, was absorbed to the exclusion of all else with the crafty warrior who began now to stalk him. He saw there was no overconfidence in Brogar this time to make him less wary. The giant knew full well how dangerous the smaller man was.

Ki-Gor watched the huge Negro's fingers tighten on the long knife as the fellow moved forward, his thick, gorilla arms held wide. The man's red, pig eyes glinted evilly, and his loose features were set in a flaccid, hideous leer. Ki-Gor judged the overly wide reach of the native, measuring the disadvantage he must overcome.

While the big fellow came on, the Jungle Lord slipped into his deadly crouch, balancing his muscled weight for instant action. His earlier fatigue was gone. The few hours of rest had renewed all the tremendous power of his superbly conditioned body, and every nerve and fiber was alert. He followed the slightest move Brogar made, and with his knowledge of a thousand battles, calculated the best means of attack against this behemoth.

Then Brogar struck. The giant threw his great weight forward three paces and slashed his knife arm like a striking python at Ki-Gor's chest. He hoped for his long reach and sudden onslaught to blast the White Lord over, disabling him before he could fend the blow.

Ki-Gor made no effort to retreat. His keen eyes anticipated the attack when Brogar betrayed himself through an unconscious tensing. The Jungle Lord threw himself forward, reversing the natural human reaction to retreat, and through his blinding speed slipped under Brogar's knife arm and close against the giant. In the same motion, he chopped his blade into the black's left shoulder with a short, hard blow. The native roared with pain and fury at this unexpected turn of events, and goaded into madness threw off all caution, charged headlong at Ki-Gor.

The Jungle Lord fought to retrieve

his knife, but the strength of his blow had buried it in the rigid mass of bone and muscle of the native's shoulder. He delayed a fraction too long before freeing the blade from its human sheath and all the trampling power of the monster burst against him. Before he could recover or fight back, the raging man made his attack and sent Ki-Gor hurtling back.

The Jungle Lord crashed on the stone, slid wildly to the edge of the rock slab, teetered helplessly for a moment, and then fell. While the breathless audience watched, he whirled over in the air and struck with his body half on, half off, the narrow bridge which joined the altar to the temple floor. Dazed, he hung limply, then with rending slowness recovered sufficiently to inch himself upon the bridge.

Had the brutish giant been in full possession of his feeble wits, he would have leaped from the altar and kicked the White Lord into the pit. The wounded Brogar, however, in his animal madness at first did not realize what had occurred, and by the time he grasped the situation, Ki-Gor was on his feet. Fearing the death that lurked in the pit, he would not risk going out on the narrow walk to meet even a dazed foe.

Ki-Gor swayed on his feet, shaking his head oddly. He blinked his eyes and looked strangely at the knife still tightly gripped in his fingers. He raised his right hand to the side of his head and carefully felt along the long scar there.

He turned and his puzzled gaze ran over the room, along the nearby rows of seats, and came to rest on his mate. She seemed to swim into his vision, a blurred, uneven picture which gradually came into focus.

Then abruptly he understood. The picture fitted into place. His bruised lips drew into a smile, and softly he formed the name, "Helene."

The terrific fall he had taken, striking head first on the altar, had been the shock needed to counteract the damage suffered from Basru. His memory came back with a rush. And the sight of that beloved face, pale with fear for him, sent a rush of indomitable power over him.

Ki-Gor whirled and ran lightly back to the altar. His mind raced feverishly. Determined to end the bout quickly, he circled the wounded giant like a hunting lion, his lithe, liquid movements ominous with purpose. Brogar circled with his antagonist, his black face yellow with strain and hate, alert for the least opportunity to slash at the Jungle Lord. Brogar was on the defensive now, but the stiffening wound did not disable him for his huge, insensitive body was not to be incapacitated by so minor a hurt.

Faster Ki-Gor circled, while his eyes, narrow and cold, endlessly measured the giant. He was darting lightning when his dagger struck. His massive legs flung him in, and his corded right arm exploded into action. The giant staggered under the rush and crimson flooded over his chest.

But the human beast was not to die so easily. The coursing hate in him and the physical urge to live made him bat-

ter back with frenzied power. Brogar had but one fleeting opportunity to use his knife, and Ki-Gor's remorseless battle skill nullified this chance. As Ki-Gor struck, the giant stabbed at him, but the White Lord caught and held that huge wrist in mid-air. The next moment his blade tore to the bone of the native's forearm, and the threatening knife tumbled from the fellow's fingers.

Brogar screamed hoarsely, and to protect himself, flung his great arms about Ki-Gor. He held the Jungle Lord in a chest-cracking hug, and the two men pitted brute strength in a gasping struggle. In their staggering battle, they moved ever closer to the edge of the altar.

Ki-Gor saw the yawning pit and fought to break the giant's steel grip. Brogar saw or knew nothing, every ounce of his ebbing strength being centered at crushing this dreadful foe. When the Jungle Lord fought to pull back, he threw his monstrous bulk into a counter pull, and the lighter man could not stand against him. The giant jerked backwards and one foot slipped off the altar. Too late he realized what he had done.

He teetered clumsily, and then careened into the dark pit, dragging Ki-Gor with him.

The two men hurtled down in the darkness. Instinctively, even in this desperate situation, Ki-Gor struggled to spin Brogar's great bulk under him. He accomplished this just as they struck. The two splashed deep into the slime and water, and although the impact was cushioned by the liquid, their velocity was so great Brogar's back was snapped by the impact.

Ki-Gor sought with difficulty to reach the surface of this stagnant, muddy pool. He gulped deep breaths of the foul air into his lungs, as he swam heavily in the slimy water. His eyes gradually accustomed themselves to the darkness and he made out faintly the outline of the nearby wall. He forced his way through the filthy water until he came to an ooze-covered ledge at the base of the wall.

The Jungle Lord hoisted himself onto this ledge, and a moment after heard the water break apart with a loud splash. Waves lapped over the stone ledge and broke against his ankles. He stared into the dimness and made out a vague but hideous reptilian form rising and shifting in the pool. The long, smooth head of the immense serpent weaved in a frightening pattern.

Ki-Gor shrank back against the pit's stone side and watched the serpent. Flattened against the wet rock, he saw the darting head dive into the black water and jerk up again holding a big object. The huge serpent had searched out Brogar's body and was gulping it. Fearful of any movement that might attract the serpent's attention, Ki-Gor glued himself to the wall hardly daring to breathe, until at length the ugly monster slid beneath the surface.

IX. - The Coming of Zaa

A faint glimmer of light was visible across the pit. Ki-Gor worked his way around the perilous ledge, and after an

eternity, he reached the point. He peered through a small opening into a room where an aged woman sat dozing on a bench. From the stained, yellow cape worn by the old crone, Ki-Gor knew she was a servant of Zaa. Exploring the area around the tiny window, he found he stood outside a stone door which was tightly fastened.

He sought in desperation for a means to get that door opened. He shivered, realizing a stream of cold water was splashing down on his shoulders from above. The fresh water came from a point high on the wall. He rubbed one chilled arm, unable to bring himself to leave the lighted window, and as he stood there under the trickling water, a plan of escape came to him. Immediately he began scrubbing his body, vigorously washing and rubbing every inch of his skin.

Ki-Gor placed his face to the little window and called to the dozing crone. The old woman, deaf and half-blind, did not rouse until after repeated calls. Finally, she awoke with a start and stared about her with dim eyes, eventually locating the source of the voice.

The aged handmaiden of Zaa was upset and obviously disturbed by this disturbance beyond the door. She hesitated, fright growing on her, but deciding to act at last, she took a torch from its holder and carried it to the window.

The light from the torch streamed through the narrow slit and illuminated Ki-Gor's face. The Jungle Lord stared unflinchingly at the old crone, and in a commanding voice cried, "Open the door, Old One, that I may enter!"

The sight of this calm face staring at her from the pit completely upset the woman, and nearly fainting with fright, she stuttered in her cracked voice, "But who are you, who stands unscathed in the pit?"

It was an unbelievable occurrence to the woman. Since long, dim years before, when she was first relegated to this lonely task of watching over the pit, no single person had ever emerged alive from the Pit of the Serpent God. Ki-Gor now made his great gamble for freedom. The answer he gave to the woman's question was, "Open, Old One, and look upon me! Certainly, a true believer should be pleased at my coming!" The dim, watery, frightened eyes peered more closely at the clean-cut masculine features revealed by the window, and as the woman's frown changed to amazement, Ki-Gor knew he had won his gamble. The crone's mind, never too clear in the calmest moments, at this time of frightened bewilderment, jumped suddenly to the only conclusion which had presented itself.

She blanched with fear, and cried out, "It is he—Zaa-the Great One. He comes at last in human form to aid us."

With fluttering, fumbling hands she unlocked the stone door and utilized her greatest strength to shove it open. When the door swung out, the old handmaiden fell to her knees on the floor, abject and humble before this proud, regal white man she thought was Zaa.

When he stood in the pit, anxiously seeking a means of escape, the memory

of the High Priestess' prayer for Zaa to return to his people had come into Ki-Gor's mind. The Jungle Lord scrubbed the dark coating from his skin on the long chance he could pass himself off as Zaa. He little thought at the moment this plan would succeed so completely, but he had hoped it would so baffle and interest the ancient woman that she would permit him to enter.

Realizing now the extent to which this superstitious woman was taken in by his masquerade, he decided to press this opportunity to the extreme.

He strode into the small room, assuming a proud, arrogant, disdainful air. "You are a faithful servant, Old One, and for this one reason I present myself first to you. The young ones of the temple do not serve me with their hearts as do you. Thus do I reward you first for your years of faithful service to me."

Overwhelmed by this compliment, the grovelling woman, long resentful of the treatment handed her by the younger ones of the temple, could mutter only. "True, O Lord Zaa, too true. No longer, though, will the young ones scorn me after this. They have laughed at me because of this lonely job it has been my lot to tend. They will laugh no longer."

"Rise now, and fetch me fitting garments, for I would appear before my people," Ki-Gor ordered. He cautioned the woman to secure these garments without the knowledge of anyone, saying he did not wish to disclose his presence until the height of the sacrificial ceremonies in the temple.

Exaltation lent speed to the crone's feet, and soon Ki-Gor was caparisoned in the golden helmet and sweeping scarlet cape which were held always in readiness for the hoped-for return of Zaa. Ki-Gor buckled at his side the jeweled sword and slipped his feet into golden sandals. He told the woman to remain at her post, and then with a sweep of his cape he strode from the room.

Ki-Gor went through the deserted halls, and proceeded quickly to the door by which he previously was taken into the temple. He held himself back in the doorway, surveying the barbaric scene. Dian, High Priestess of Zaa, stood in the center of the sacrificial stone holding high a bloody knife.

Dian loosened her cape and dropped it onto the yellow stone. She stood there in the flickering light of the torches swaying in time to the quickening chant of the massed spectators. The jewels on her almost nude body glittered with her sensuous movement. She jerked the knife in a stabbing motion, and four guards hurried forward another screaming victim.

Ki-Gor acted quickly to forestall this sacrifice. Tall and regal in the robes of the Serpent God, he stepped from concealment and stalked into the temple, going unnoticed until he stood before the altar. The sacred robes were known to every person in the temple. Every eye in the frenzied multitude seemed to focus on him at the same time.

Tense and ear-tingling silence exploded over the temple. The pregnant

quiet was terrible in its intensity. Then and awed murmur ran back, over the staring ranks, swelling and growing as from countless throats burst the astonished whisper, "Zaa! . . . It is Zaa! He has come!"

The dense mass of natives went to their knees as one man. The white-skinned snake people, thunderstruck by Ki-Gor's regal figure, hesitated uncertainly, and then one by one bent in homage. Behind him on the altar, the tense bare form of the High Priestess knelt.

Two people in the temple stared at this embodiment of the Serpent God with the most confused disbelief of all. Tembu George and Helene could not believe their eyes for a second. They were shaken by the Jungle Lord's audacity, but wild hope rose in their hearts.

Ki-Gor acted now to assert his authority.

His deep, measured voice resounded through the hall. "I—Zaa—return to lead you as I led your forefathers."

A low roar like the breaking surf rose from the snake people and died away, as they awaited his next statement.

"I am sickened of the blood spilled in my name, and these forays against peaceful tribes henceforth shall cease, and there shall be no further sacrifices. I declare this reign of blood and terror ended, and I command you to live in peace.

"In penance for your wrongs, I order you to remain in the temple tonight. Tomorrow you will gather again and select a chieftain and a council of wise, good men to lead you in a life of peace."

Cries of praise thundered up from the natives, except for the glowering black guards. Ki-Gor did not notice the shiftyeyed guard leader stare at him, and turn cursing to scurry to a group of the white warriors. The cruel, hard Basru, far more cunning than the others, caught the overjoyed look on Helene's face when she saw Ki- Gor, and as the Jungle Lord spoke, he recognized the man posing as Zaa.

"I go now into the inner temple," Ki-Gor cried, "and the prisoners and my bride shall accompany me."

The Jungle Lord held out his hand to Helene, and the red-haired girl rose and came to him. The restraining hands on the prisoners loosened, and all that was left of the original twelve, three men including Tembu George, joined Ki-Gor.

Before the five could move, a white warrior leaped shouting: "This man is not Zaa!" he screamed. "He is the white savage Basru took this girl from far downriver. I don't know how he comes here, but he is no god, and my sword will prove it."

The warrior darted at Ki-Gor, sword in hand, but the alert Jungle Lord was not to be checkmated so easily. He swept Helene behind him, and Zaa's sword flashed gleaming from its scabbard. The two swords shattered together as Ki-Gor blocked the man's sweeping thrust and locked the weapons hilt to hilt. Before the white warrior

could brace himself, the Jungle Lord threw his great weight forward, snapping the man's blade from his grip, and in the same motion, half-severed the fellow's head.

More white warriors ran at them, and Ki-Gor retreated toward the only open avenue, the narrow bridge to the altar. He tossed Tembu George the fallen man's sword, and shoulder to shoulder they fought off the attackers, while Helene led the two natives over the stone walk.

Helene in the excitement had forgotten the High Priestess. Dian stood on the altar, holding the sacrificial knife, with her eyes glued on Ki-Gor's mate. The High Priestess' face was contorted with savage hate as she flung at Helene, intent on stabbing the girl. A pool of blood from the native sacrificed on the altar lay across the stone. The feet of the nearly-nude priestess struck the wet place, and she slipped out of control and plunged headlong past Helene into the pit.

The black mass of natives saw the white warriors swarm at the mighty figure they believed to be the Serpent God. Zaa had promised them they could rule themselves, and he had discredited and cast out these cruel masters.

A handful of blacks sprang to defend the Serpent God and the action of these few catapulted the entire mob forward. The roar of their charge shook the ancient temple as they flowed against the fairskinned swordsman and the force of guards commanded by Basru.

"Come," Ki-Gor called to Tembu George, "We must try to get through to the inner temple."

The two men joined the others on the altar. Ki-Gor glanced across the yawning pit, locating an open space among the struggling groups on the far side. He pointed to the spot, and without a word, Tembu George leaped the gap. Ki-Gor picked up Helene and tossed her across to his waiting friend. Quickly the two natives followed, and then with an effortless bound, Ki-Gor was over the pit.

He led the way to the door, sword ready for instant action, while Tembu George brought up behind. Ki-Gor sent the others down the passage, while he lingered a moment to make sure they were not followed. And his wait was not in vain.

A tall, raw-boned guard forced his way to the door, his uneasy eyes searching for Ki-Gor. It was Basru staying on the scent of his victim. This time the Jungle Lord recognized the renegade, and with a grim smile, he stepped out to meet him.

Basru came at Ki-Gor like a dervish, his lean body whirling and dancing, and his sword whining as it slashed. The Jungle Lord met him with equal agility, and their blades sparked as they whirled.

Ki-Gor pressed the attack, raining blows at Basru's head and shoulders, and the tall native retreated, almost staggering at times under the shock of the white man's power. The sword bit at the native's head ever faster, and Basru raised his guard further to ward off the onslaught. This was the trap Ki-Gor planned, and with an abrupt change of

tactics, he abandoned the chopping head blows and stabbed completely through Basru's chest. The black man reeled in anguish and fell backwards, writhing in death.

Delaying no longer, Ki-Gor ran in pursuit of Helene and the two prisoners with Tembu George. The five hurried out of the temple and sprinted through the deserted streets. The battle clamor fell behind them as they went down the flagstone road to the lagoon. It was a minute's work to find and launch a small canoe.

There was no sound but the hard breathing of the men as they sent the canoe scudding over the lake. Helene sat quietly, drinking in the splendor of the African night for a time. Ki-Gor sat behind her and in the silvery brilliance of the full moon he saw every feature of her lovely face when she turned to stare at him.

"Tell me something, Ki-Gor," she said in her low, throaty voice.

"Yes, my dear," he answered softly.

"As I remember, Ki-Gor," she continued, "this all began because you had an important appointment with Tembu George. Tell me, just what was that appointment about?"

Ki-Gor grinned sheepishly. "Well," he said, ducking his head like a small boy explaining where the jam disappeared, "we were going hunting."

"Urrimmm," commented Helene.

An eavesdropper named Tembu George was totally unsuccessful in his attempt to suppress a chuckle.

STAR HUNTER

I

Nahuatl's larger moon pursued the smaller, greenish globe of its companion across a cloudless sky in which the stars made a speckled pattern like the scales of a huge serpent coiled around a black bowl. Ras Hume paused at the border of scented spike-flowers on the top terrace of the Pleasure House to wonder why he thought of serpents. He understood. Mankind's age-old hatred, brought from his native planet to the distant stars, was evil symbolized by a coil in a twisted, belly-path across the ground. And on Nahuatl, as well as a dozen other worlds, Wass was the serpent.

A night wind was rising, stirring the exotic, half-dozen other worlds' foliage planted cunningly on the terrace to simulate the mystery of an off-world jungle.

"Hume?" The inquiry seemed to come out of thin air over his head.

"Hume," he repeated his own name calmly.

A shaft of light brilliant enough to dazzle the eyes struck through the massed vegetation, revealing a path. Hume lingered for a moment, offering a counterstroke of indifference in what he had always known would be a test of wits. Wass was Veep of a shadowy empire, but that was apart from the world in which Ras Hume moved.

He strode deliberately down the corridor illuminated between leaf and blossom walls. A grotesque lump of crystal leered at him from the heart of a tharsala lilly bed. The intricate carving of a devilish nonhuman set of features was a work of alien art. Tendrils of smoke curled from the thing's flat nostrils, and Hume sniffed the scent of a narcotic he recognized. He smiled. Such measures might soften up the usual civ Wass interviewed here. But a star pilot turned out-hunter was immunized against such mind clouding.

There was a door, the lintel and posts of which had more carving, but this time Terran, Hume thought—old, very old. Perhaps rumor was right, Milfors Wass might be truly native Terran and not second, third, nor fourth generation star stock as most of those who reached Nahuatl were.

The room beyond that elaborately carved entrance was, in contrast, severe. Rust walls were bare of any pattern save an oval disk of cloudy golden shimmer behind the chair at the long table of solid ruby rock from Nahuatl's poisonous sister planet of Xipe. Without a pause he walked to the chair and seated himself without invitation to wait in the empty room.

That clouded oval might be a com device. Hume refused to look at it after his first glance. This interview was to be person to person. If Wass did not appear within a reasonable length of time he would leave.

And Hume hoped to any unseen watcher he presented the appearance of a man not impressed by stage settings. After all he was now in the seller's space boots, and it was a seller's market.

Ras Hume rested his right hand on the table. Against the polished glow of the stone, the substance of it was flesh-tanned brown—a perfect match for his left. And the subtle difference between true flesh and false was no hindrance in the use of those fingers or their strength. Save that it had pushed him out of command of a cargo-cum-liner and hurled him down from the pinnacle of a star pilot. There were bitter brackets about his mouth, set there by that hand as deeply as if carved with a knife.

It had been four years—planet time—since he had lifted the Rigal Rover from the launch pad on Sargon Two. He had suspected it might be a tricky voyage with young Tors Wazalitz, who was a third owner of the Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz line, and a Gratz chewer. But one did not argue with the owners, except when the safety of the ship was concerned. The Rigal Rover had made a crash landing at Alexbut, and a badly injured pilot had brought her in by will, hope and a faith he speedily lost.

He received a plasta-hand, the best the medical center could supply and a pension for life, forced by the public acclaim for a man who had saved ships and lives. Then—the sack because a crazed Tors Wazalitz was dead. They dared not try to stick Hume with a murder charge; the voyage record tapes had been shot straight through to the Patrol Council, and the evidence on those could be neither faked nor tam-

pered with. They could not give him a quick punishment, but they could try to arrange a slow death. The word had gone out that Hume was off pilot boards. They had tried to keep him out of space.

And they might have done it, too, had he been the usual type of pilot, knowing only his trade. But some odd streak of restlessness had always led him to apply for the rim runs, the very first flights to newly opened worlds. Outside of the survey men, there were few qualified pilots of his seniority who possessed such a wide and varied knowledge of the galactic frontiers.

So when he learned that the ships' boards were irrevocably closed to him, Hume had signed up with the Out-Hunters' Guild. There was a vast difference between lifting a liner from a launching pad and guiding civ hunters to worlds surveyed and staked out for their trips into the wild. Hume relished the exploration part—he disliked the leading-by-the-hand of nine-tenths of the Guild's clients.

But if he had not been in the Guild service he would never have made that find on Jumala. That lucky, lucky find! Hume's plasta-flesh fingers curved, their nails drew across the red surface of the table. And where was Wass? He was about to rise and go when the golden oval on the wall smoked, its substance thinning to a mist as a man stepped through to the floor.

The newcomer was small compared to the former pilot, but he had breadth of shoulder which made the upper part of his torso overbalance his thin hips and legs. He was dressed most conservatively except for a jeweled plaque resting on the tightly stretched gray silk of his upper tunic at heart level. Unlike Hume he wore no visible arms belt, but the other did not doubt that there were a number of devices concealed in that room to counter the efforts of any assassin.

The man from the mirror spoke with a flat, toneless voice. His black hair had been shaven well above his ears, the locks left on top of his skull trained into a kind of bird's crest. As Hume, his visible areas of flesh were deeply browned, but by nature rather than exposure to space, the pilot guessed. His features were harsh, with a prominent nose, a back-slanting forehead, eyes dark, long and large, with heavy lids.

"Now—" He spread both his hands, palm down and flat on the table, a gesture Hume found himself for some unknown reason copying. "You have a proposition?"

But the pilot was not to be hurried, any more than he was to be influenced by Wass' stage-settings.

"I have an idea," he corrected.

"There are many ideas." Wass leaned back in his chair, but he did not remove his hands from the table. "Perhaps one in a thousand is the kernel of something useful. For the rest, there is no need to trouble a man."

"Agreed," Hume returned evenly. "But that one idea in a thousand can also pay off in odds of a million to one, when and if a man has it."

"And you have such a one?"

"I have such a one." It was Hume's role now to impress the other by his unshakable confidence. He had studied all the possibilities. Wass was the right man, perhaps the only partner he could find. But Wass must not know that.

"On Jumala?" Wass returned.

If that stare and statement was intended to rattle Hume it was a wasted shot. To discover that he had just returned from that frontier planet required no ingenuity on the Veep's part.

"Perhaps."

"Come, Out-Hunter Hume. We are both busy men, this is no time to play tricks with words and hints. Either you have made a find worth the attention of my organization or you have not. Let me be the judge."

This was it—the corner of no return. But Wass had his own code. The Veep had established his tight control of his lawless organization by set rules, and one of them was, don't be greedy. Wass was never greedy, which is why the patrol had never been able to pull him down, and those who dealt with him did not talk. If you had a good thing, and Wass accepted temporary partnership, he kept his side of the bargain rigidly. You did the same—or regretted your stupidity.

"A claimant to the Kogan estate—that good enough for you?"

Wass showed no surprise. "And how would such a claimant be profitable to us?"

Hume appreciated that "us"; he had an in now. "If you supply the claimant, surely you can claim a reward, in more ways than one."

"True. But one does not produce a claimant out of a Krusha dream. The investigation for any such claim now would be made by a verity lab and no imposture will pass those tests. While a real claimant would not need your help or mine."

"Depends upon the claimant."

"One you discovered on Jumala?"

"No." Hume shook his head slowly. "I found something else on Jumala—an L-B from Largo Drift intact and in good shape. From the evidence now in existence it could have landed there with survivors aboard."

"And the evidence of such survivors living on—that exists also?"

Hume shrugged, his plasta-flesh fingers flexed slightly. "It has been six planet years, there is a forest where the L-B rests. No, no evidence at present."

"The Largo Drift," Wass repeated slowly, "carrying, among others, Gentlefem Tharlee Kogan Brodie."

"And her son Rynch Brodie, who was at the time of the Largo Drift's disappearance a boy of fourteen."

"You have indeed made a find." Wass gave that simple statement enough emphasis to assure Hume he had won. His one-in-a-thousand idea had been absorbed, was now being examined, amplified, broken down into details he could never have hoped to manage for himself, by the most cunning criminal brain in at least five solar systems.

"Is there any hope of survivors?" Wass attacked the problem straight on.

"No evidence even of there being any passengers when the L-B planeted. Those are automatic and released a certain number of seconds after an accident alarm. For what it's worth the hatch of this one was open. It could have brought in survivors. But I was on Jumala for three months with a full Guild crew and we found no sign of any castaways."

"So you propose—?"

"On the basis of my report Jumala has been put up for a safari choice. The L-B could well be innocently discovered by a client. Every one knows the story with the case dragging through the Ten Sector-Terran Courts now. Gentlefem Brodie and her son might not have been news ten years ago. Now, with a third of the Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz control going to them, any find linked with the Largo Drift would gain full galactic coverage."

"You have a choice of survivor? The Gentlefem?"

Hume shook his head. "The boy. He was bright, according to the stories since, and he would have the survival manual from the ship to study. He could have grown up in the wilds of an unopened planet. To use a woman is too tricky."

"You are entirely right. But we shall require an extremely clever imposter."

"I think not." Hume's cool glance met Wass'. "We only need a youth of the proper general physical description and the use of a conditioner."

Wass' expression did not change, there was no sign that Hume's hint had struck home. But when he replied there was a slight change in the monotone of his voice.

"You seem to know a great deal."

"I am a man who listens," Hume replied, "and I do not always discount rumor as mere fantasy."

"That is true. As one of the guild you would be interested in the root of fact beneath the plant of fiction," Wass acknowledged. "You appear to have done some planning on your own."

"I have waited and watched for just such an opportunity as this," Hume answered.

"Ah, yes. The Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz combine incurred your displeasure. I see you are also a man who does not forget easily. And that, too, I understand. It is a foible of my own, Out-Hunter. I neither forget nor forgive my enemies, though I may seem to do so and time separates them from their past deeds for a space."

Hume accepted that warning—both must keep any bargain. Wass was silent for a moment, as if to leave time for the thought to root itself, then he spoke again.

"A youth with the proper physical qualifications. Have you any such in mind?"

"I think so." Hume was short.

"He will need certain memories; those take time to tape."

"Those dealing with Jumala, I can supply."

"Yes. You will have to provide a tape beginning with his arrival on that world. For such family material as is necessary I shall have ready. An interesting project, even apart from its value to us.

This is one to intrigue experts."

Expert psycho-techs—Wass had them. Men who had slipped over the border of the law, had entered Wass' organization and prospered there. There were some techs crooked enough to enjoy such a project for its own sake, indulging in forbidden experimentation. For a moment, but only for a moment, something in Hume jibbed at the intent of carrying through his plan. Then he shrugged that tinge aside.

"How soon do you wish to move?"

"How long will preparation take?" Hume asked in return, for the second time battling a taste of concern.

"Three months, maybe four. There's research to be done and tapes to be made."

"It will be six months probably before the Guild sets up a safari for Jumala."

Wass smiled. "That need not worry us. When the time comes for a safari, there shall also be clients, impeccable clients, asking for it to be planned."

There would be, too, Hume knew. Wass' influence reached into places where the Veep himself was totally unknown. Yes, he could count on an excellent, well above suspicion, set of clients to discover Rynch Brodie when the time came.

"I can deliver the boy tonight, or early tomorrow morning. Where?"

"You are sure of your selection?"

"He fulfills the requirements, the right age, general appearance. A boy who will not be missed, who has no kin, no ties, and who will drop out of sight without any questions to be asked."

"Very well. Get him at once. Deliver him here."

Wass swept one hand across the table surface. On the red of the stone there glowed for seconds an address. Hume noted it, nodded. It was one in the center of the port town, one which could be visited at an odd hour without exciting any curiosity. He rose.

"He will be there."

"Tomorrow, at your convenience," Wass added, "you will come to this place." Again the palm moved and a second address showed on the table.

"There you will begin your tape for our use. It may take several sessions."

"I'm ready. I still have the long report to make to the Guild, so the material is still available on my note tapes."

"Excellent. Out-Hunter Hume, I salute a new colleague." At last Wass' right hand came up from the table. "May we both have luck equal to our industry."

"Luck to equal our desires," Hume corrected him.

"A very telling phrase, Out-Hunter. Luck to equal our desires. Yes, let us both deserve that."

2

The Starfall was a long way down scale from the pleasure houses of the upper town. Here strange vices were also merchandise, but not such exotics as Wass provided. This was strictly for crewmen of the star freighters who could be speedily and expertly separated from a voyage's pay in an evening.

The tantalizing scents of Wass' terraces were reduced here to simply smells, the majority of which were not fragrant.

There had already been two fatal duels that evening. A tubeman from a rim ship had challenged a space miner to settle a difference with those vicious whips made from the tail casings of Flangoid flying lizards, an encounter which left both men in ribbons, one dead, one dying. And a scarred, ex-space marine had blaster-flamed one of the Star-and-Comet dealers into charred human ash.

The young man who had been ordered to help clear away the second loser retired to the stinking alley outside to lose the meal which was part of his meager day's pay. Now he crawled back inside, his face greenish, one hand pressed to his middle section.

He was thin, the fine bones of his face tight under the pallid skin, his ribs showing even through the sleazy fabric of the threadbare tunic with its house seal. When he leaned his head back against the grime encrusted wall, raising his face to the light, his hair had the glint of bright chestnut, a gold which was also red. And for his swamper's labor he was almost fastidiously clean.

"You—Lansor!"

He shivered as if an icy wind had found him and opened his eyes. They seemed disproportionately large in his skin and bone face and were of an odd shade, neither green nor blue, but somewhere between.

"Get going, you! Ain't paying out good credits for you to sit there like you was buying on your own!" The Salarkian who loomed above him spoke accentless, idiomatic Basic Space which came strangely from between his yellow lips. A furred hand thrust the handle of a mop-up stick at the young man, a taloned thumb jerked the direction in which to use that evil-smelling object. Vye Lansor levered himself up the wall, took the mop, setting his teeth grimly.

Someone had spilled a mug of Kardo and the deep purple liquid was already patterning the con-stone floor past any hope of cleaning. But he set to work slapping the fringe of the noisome mop back and forth to sop up what he could. The smell of the Kardo uniting with the general effluvia of the room and its inhabitants heightened his queasiness.

Working blindly in a half stupor, he was not aware of the man sitting alone in the booth until his mop spattered the ankle of one of the drinking girls. She struck him sharply across the face with a sputtering curse in the tongue of Altar-Ishtar.

The blow sent him back against the open lattice of the booth. As he tried to steady himself another hand reached up, fingers tightened about his wrist. He flinched, tried to jerk away from that hold, only to discover that he was the other's prisoner.

And looking down at his captor in apprehension, he was aware even then of the different quality of this man. The patron wore the tunic of a crewman, lighter patches where the ship's badges should have been to show that he was not engaged. But, though his tunic was

shabby, dirty, his magnetic boots scuffed and badly worn, he was not like the others now enjoying the pleasures of the Starfall.

"This one—he makes trouble?" The vast bulk of the Vorm-man who was the Starfall's private law moved through the crowd with serene confidence in his own strength, which no one there, unless blind, deaf, and out-of-the-senses drunk, could dispute. His scaled, six-fingered, claw hand reached out for Lansor and the boy cringed.

"No trouble!" There was the click of authority in the voice of the man in the booth. His face, moments earlier taut and sharp with intelligence, was suddenly slack, his tone slurred as he answered: "Looks like an old shipmate. No trouble, just want a drink with an old shipmate."

But the grip which had pulled Vye forward, swung him around and down on the other bench in the booth, was anything but slack. The Vorm-man glanced from the patron of the Starfall to its least important employee and then grinned, thrusting his fanged jaws close to Lansor's.

"If the master wants to drink, you dirt-rat, you drink!"

Vye nodded vigorously, and then put his hand to his mouth, afraid his stomach was about to betray him again. Apprehensive, he watched the Vorm-man turn away. Only when that broad, green-gray back was lost in the smoky far reaches of the room did he expel his breath again.

"Here—" The grip was gone from his wrist, but fingers now put a mug into his hand. "Drink!"

He tried to protest, knew it was hopeless, and used both hands to get the mug to his lips, mouthing the stinging liquid in dull despair. Only, instead of bringing nausea with it, the stuff settled his stomach, cleared his head, with an after glow with which he managed to relax from the tense state of endurance which filled his hours in the Starfall.

Half of the mug's contents inside him and he dared to raise his eyes to the man opposite him. Yes, this was no common crewman, nor was he drunk as he had pretended for the Vorm-man. Now he watched the milling crowd with a kind of detachment, though Vye was sure he was aware of every move he himself made.

Vye finished the liquid. For the first time since he had come into this place two months earlier he felt like a real person again. And he had wits enough to guess that the potion he had just swallowed contained some drug. Only now he did not care at all. Anything which could wipe out in moments all the shame, fear, and sick despair the Starfall had planted in him was worth swallowing. Why the other had drugged him was a mystery, but he was content to wait for enlightenment.

Lansor's companion once more applied that compelling pressure to the younger man's bony forearm. Linked by that hold they left the Starfall, came into the cooler, far more pleasant atmosphere of the street. They were a block

away before Vye's guide halted, though he did not release his prisoner.

"Forty names of Dugor!" he spat.

Lansor waited, breathing in the air of early morning. The confidence of the drug still held. At the moment he was certain nothing could be as bad as the life behind him, he was willing to face what this strange patron of the Starfall had in mind.

The other slapped his hand down on an air-car call button, stood waiting until one of the city flitters landed on beam before them.

From the seat of the air-car Vye noted they were heading into the respectability of the upper city, away from the stews ringing the launch port. He tried to guess their destination or purpose, not that either mattered much. Then the car descended on a landing stage.

The stranger waved Lansor through a doorway, down a short corridor into a room of private quarters. Vye sat down gingerly on the foam seat extending from the wall as he neared. He stared about. Dimly he could just remember rooms which had this degree of comfort, but so dimly now he could not be sure they did not exist only in his vivid imagination. For Vye's imagination had buoyed him first through the drab existence in a State Child's Créche, then through a state-found job which he had lost because he could not adapt to the mechanical life of a computer tender, and had been an anchor and an escape when he had sunk through the depths of the port to the last refuge in the Starfall.

Now he pressed both his hands into the soft stuff of the seat and gaped at a small tri-dee on the wall facing him, a miniature scene of life on some other planet wherein a creature enveloped in short black and white striped fur crept belly flat, to stalk long-legged, short-winged birds making blood-red splotches against yellow reed banks under a pale violet sky. He feasted on its color, on the sense of freedom and off-world wonders which it raised in him.

"Who are you?"

The stranger's abrupt question brought him back, not only to the room but to his own precarious position. He moistened his lips, no longer quite so aglow with confidence.

"Vye—Vye Lansor." Then he added his other identification, "S. C. C. 425061."

"State child, eh?" The other had pushed a button for a refresher cup, then was sipping its contents slowly. He did not ring for a second to offer Vye. "Parents?"

Lansor shook his head. "I was brought in after the Five-Hour Fever epidemic. They didn't try to keep records, there were too many of us."

The man was watching him levelly over the rim of that cup. There was something cold in that study, something which curbed Vye's pleasant feeling of only moments earlier. Now the other set down his drink, crossed the room. Cupping his hand under Lansor's chin, he brought up his head in a way which stirred a sullen resentment in the

younger man, yet something told him resistance would only bring trouble.

"I'd say Terran stock—not more than second generation." He was talking to himself more than to Vye. He loosed his hold on the boy's chin, but he still stood there surveying him from head to foot. Lansor wanted to squirm, but he fought that impulse, and managed to meet the other's gaze when it reached his face again.

"No—not the usual port-drift. I was right all the way." Now he looked at Vye again as if the younger man did have a brain, emotions, some call on his interest as a personality. "Want a job?"

Lansor pressed his hand deeper into the foam seat. "What—what kind?" He was angry and ashamed at that small betraying break in his voice.

"You have scruples?" The stranger appeared to think that amusing. Vye reddened, but he was also more than a little surprised that the man in the worn space uniform had read hesitancy right. Someone out of the Starfall should not be too particular about employment, and he could not tell why he was.

"Nothing illegal, I assure you." The man crossed to set his refresher cup in the empty slot. "I am an Out-Hunter."

Lansor blinked. This had all taken on some of the fantastic aura of a dream. The other was eyeing him impatiently, as if he had expected some reaction.

"You may inspect my credentials if you wish."

"I believe you," Vye found his voice.

"I happen to need a gearman."

But this wasn't happening! Of course, it couldn't happen to him, Vye Lansor, state child, swamper in the Starfall. Things such as this did not happen, except in a thaline dream, and he wasn't a smoke eater! It was the kind of dream a man didn't want to wake from, not if he was port-drift.

"Would you be willing to sign on?"

Vye tried to clutch reality to himself, to remain level-headed. A gearman for an Out-Hunter! Why five men out of six would pay a large premium for a chance at such rating. The chill of doubt cut through the first hazy rosiness. A swamper from a port-side dive simply did not become a gearman for a Guild Hunter.

Again it was as if the stranger read his thoughts. "Look here," he spoke abruptly. "I had a bad time myself, years ago. You resemble someone to whom I owe a debt. I can't repay him, but I can make the scales a little even this way."

"Make the scales even." Vye's fading hope brightened. Then the Out-Hunter was a follower of the Fata Rite. That would explain everything. If you could not repay a good deed to the one you owed, you must balance the Eternal Scales in another fashion. He relaxed again, a great many of his unasked questions so answered.

"You will accept?"

Vye nodded eagerly. "Yes, Out-Hunter." He still could not believe that this was happening.

The other pressed the refresher button, and this time he handed Lansor the brimming cup. "Drink on the bargain." His words had the ring of command.

Lansor drank, gulping down the contents of the cup, and suddenly was aware of being tired. He leaned back against the wall, his eyes closed.

Ras Hume took the cup from the lax fingers of the young man. So far, very good. Chance appeared to be playing on his side of the board. It had been chance which had steered him into the Starfall just three nights ago when he had been in quest of his imposter. And Vye Lansor was better than he dared hope to find. The boy had the right coloring, he had been batted around enough to fall for the initial story, he was malleable now. And after Wass' techs worked on him he would be Rynch Brodie—heir to one-third of Kogan-Bors-Wazalitz!

"Come!" He touched Vye on the shoulder. The boy opened his eyes but his gaze did not focus as he got slowly to his feet. Hume glanced at his planet-time watch. It was still very early; the chance he must run in getting Lansor out of this building was small if they went at once. Guiding the younger man with a light hold above the elbow, he walked him out back to the flitter landing stage. The air-car was waiting. Hume's sense of being a gambler facing a run of good luck grew as he shepherded the boy into the flitter, punched a cover destination and took off.

On another street he transferred himself and his charge into a second air-car, set the destination to within a block of the address Wass had given him. Not much later he walked Vye into a small lobby with a discreet list of names posted in its rack. No occupations attached to those colored streamers Hume noted. This meant either that their owners represented luxury trades, where a name signified the profession or service, or that they were covers—perhaps both. Wass' world fringed many different circles, intermingled with some quite surprising professions dedicated to the comfort, pleasure or health of the idle rich, off-world nobility, and the criminal elite.

Hume fingered the right call button, knowing that the thumb pattern he had left on Wass' conference table would have already been relayed as his symbol of admission here. A flicker of light winked below the name, the wall to the right shimmered, and produced a doorway. Steering Vye to it, Hume nodded to the man waiting there. He was a flat-faced Eucorian of the servant caste, and now he reached out to draw Lansor over the threshold.

"I have him, gentlehomo." His voice was as expressionless as his face. There was another shimmer and the door disappeared.

Hume brushed his hand down the outer side of his thigh, wiping flesh against the coarse stuff of the crew uniform. He left the lobby frowning at his own thoughts.

Stupid! A swamper from one of the worst rat holes in the port. Like as not that youngster would have had his brains kicked out in a brawl, or been fried to a crisp when some drunk got wild with a blaster, before the year was out. He'd done him a real kindness, given him a chance at a future less than

one man in a billion ever had the power to even dream about. Why, if Vye Lansor had known what was going to happen to him, he would have been so willing to volunteer, that he would have dragged Hume here. There was no reason to have any regrets over the boy, he had never had it so good—never! There was only one small period of risk for Vye to face. Those days he would have to spend alone on Jumala between the time Wass' organization would plant him there and the coming of Hume's party to "discover" him. Hume himself would tape every possible aid to cover that period. All the knowledge of a Guild Out-Hunter, added to the information gathered by the survey, would be used to provide Rynch Brodie with the training necessary for wilderness survival. Hume was already listing the items to be included as he strode down the street, his tread once more assured.

3

His head ached dully, of that he was conscious first. As he turned, without opening his eyes, he felt the brush of softness against his cheek, and a pungent odor fill his nostrils.

He opened his eyes, stared up past a rim of broken rock toward the cloudless, blue-green sky. A relay clicked into proper place deep in his mind.

Of course! He had been trying to lure a strong-jaws out of its traphole with hooked bait, then his foot had slipped. Rynch Brodie sat up, flexed his bare thin arms, and moved his long legs experimentally. No broken bones, anyway. But still he frowned. Odd—that dream which jarred with the here and now.

Crawling to the side of the creek, he dipped head and shoulders into the water, letting the chill of the stream flush away some of his waking bewilderment. He shook himself, making the drops fly from his uncovered torso and arms, and then discovered his hunting tackle.

He stood for a moment fingering each piece of his scanty clothing, recalling every piece of labor or battle which had added pouch, belt, strip of fabric to his equipment. Yet—there was still that odd sense of strangeness, as if none of this was really his.

Rynch shook his head, wiped his wet face with his arm. It was all his, that was sure, every bit of it. He'd been lucky, the survival manual on the L-B had furnished him with general directions and this was a world which was not unfriendly—not if one was prepared for trouble.

He climbed up and loosened the net, coiling its folds into one hand, taking the good spear in his other. A bush stirred ahead, against the pull of the light breeze. Rynch froze, then the haft of his spear slid into a new hand grip, the coils of his net spun out. A snarl cut over the purr of water.

The scarlet blot which sprang for his throat was met with the flail of the net. Rynch stabbed twice at the creature he had so swept off balance. A water-cat, this year's cub. Dying, its claws, overlong in proportion to its paws, drew inch deep furrows in the earth and gravel. Its eyes, almost the same shade as its long, burr-entangled body fur, glared up at

him in deathly enmity.

As Rynch watched, that feeling that he was studying something strange, utterly alien, came to him once again. Yet he had hunted water-cats for many seasons. Fortunately they were solitary, evil-tempered beasts that marked out a roaming territory to defend it from others of their kind, and not too many were to be encountered in cross-country travel.

He stooped to pull his net from the now still paws. Some definite place he must reach. The compulsion to move on in that sudden flash shook him, raised the dull ache still troubling his temples into a punishing throb. Going down on his knees, Rynch once more turned to the stream water; this time after splashing it onto his face, he drank from his cupped hands.

Rynch swayed, his wet hands over his eyes, digging fingertips into the skin of his forehead to ease that pain bursting in his skull. Sitting in a room, drinking from a cup—it was as if a shadow picture fitted over the reality of the stream, rocks and brush about him. He had sat in a room, had drank from a cup—that action had been important!

A sharp, hot pain made him lose contact with that shadow. He looked down. From the gravel, from under rocks, gathered an army of blue-black, hard-shelled things, their clawed forelimbs extended, blue sense organs raised on fleshy stalks well above their heads, all turned towards the dead feline.

Rynch slapped out vigorously, stumbled into the water loosening the hold of two vicious scavengers on the torn skin of his ankle when he waded out knee-deep. Already that black tongue of small bodies licked across the red-haired side of the hunter. Within minutes the corpse would be only well-cleaned bones.

Retrieving his spear and net, Rynch immersed both in the water to clean off attackers, and hurried on, splashing through the creek until he was well away from the vicinity of the kill. A little later he flushed a four-footed creature from between two rocks and killed it with one blow from his spear haft. He skinned his kill, feeling the substance of the skill. Was it exceedingly rough hide, or rudimentary scales? And knew a return of that puzzlement.

He felt, he thought painfully as he toasted the dry looking, grayish meat on a sharpened stick, as if a part of him knew very well what manner of animal he had killed. And yet, far inside him, another person he could not understand stood aloof watching in amazement.

He was Rynch Brodie, and he had been traveling on the Largo Drift with his mother.

Memory presented him automatically with a picture of a thin woman with a narrow, rather unhappy face, a twist of elaborately dressed hair in which jeweled lights sparkled. There had been something bad—memory was no longer exact but chaotic. And his head ached as he tried to recall that time with greater clarity. Afterwards the L-B and a man with him in it—

"Simmons Tait!"

An officer, badly hurt. He had died when the L-B landed here. Rynch had a clear memory of himself piling rocks over Tait's twisted body. He had been alone then with only the survival manual and some of the L-B supplies. The important thing was that he must never forget he was Rynch Brodie.

He licked grease from his fingers. The ache in his head made him drowsy. He curled up on a patch of sun-warmed sand and slept.

Or did he? His eyes were open again. Now the sky above him was no longer a bowl of light, but rather a muted halo of evening. Rynch sat up, his heart pounding as if he had been racing to outdistance the rising wind now pushing against his half-naked body.

What was he doing here? Where was here?

Panic, carried through from that awakening, dried his mouth, roughened his skin, made wet the palms of the hands he dug into the sand on either side of him. Vaguely, a picture projected into his mind—he had sat in a room, and watched a man come to him with a cup. Before that, he had been in a place of garish light and evil smells.

But he was Rynch Brodie, he had come here on an L-B when he was a boy, he had buried the ship's officer under a pile of rocks, managed to survive by himself because he had applied the aids in the boat to learn how. This morning he had been hunting a strong-jaw, tempting it out of its hiding by a hook and line and a bait of fresh killed skipper.

Rynch's hands went to his face, he crouched forward on his knees. That all was true, he could prove it—he would prove it! There was the strong-jaw's den back there, somewhere on the rise where he had left the snapped haft of the spear he had broken in his fall. If he could find the den, then he would be sure of the reality of everything else.

He had only had a very real dream—that was it! Only, why did he continue to dream of that room, that man, and the cup? Of the place of lights and smells, which he hated so much that the hate was a sour taste in his fright-dried mouth? None of it had ever been a part of Rynch Brodie's world.

Through the dusk he started back up the stream bed, towards the narrow little valley where he had wakened after that fall. Finally, finding shelter within the heart of a bush, he crouched low, listening to the noises of another world which awoke at night to take over the stage from the day dwellers.

As he plodded back, he fought off panic, realizing that some of those noises he could identify with confidence, while others remained mysteries. He bit down hard on the knuckles of his clenched fist, attempting to bend that discovery into evidence. Why did he know at once that that thin, eerie wailing was the flock call of a leather-winged, feathered tree dweller, and that a coughing grunt from downstream was just a noise?

"Rynch Brodie—Largo Drift—Tait." He tasted the blood his teeth drew from

his own skin as he recited that formula. Then he scrambled up. His feet tangled in the net, and he went down again, his head cracking on a protruding root.

Nothing tangible reached him in that brush shelter. What did venture out of hiding to investigate was a substance none of his species could have named. It was neither body, nor mind—perhaps it was closest to alien emotion.

Making contact stealthily, but with confidence, it explored after its own fashion. Then, puzzled, it withdrew to report. And since that to which it reported was governed by a set pattern which had not been altered for eons, its only answer was a basic command reaffirmed. Again it made contact, strove to carry out that order fruitlessly. Where it should have found easy passage, a clear channel to carry influence to the sleeper's brain, it found a jumble of impressions, interwoven until they made a protective barrier.

The invader strove to find some pattern, or meaning—withdrew baffled. But its invasion, as ghostly as that had been, loosened a knot here, cleared a passage there.

Rynch awoke at dawn, slowly, dazedly, sorting out sounds, smells, thoughts. There was a room, a man, trouble and fear, then there was he, Rynch Brodie, who had lived in this wilderness on an unmapped frontier world for the passage of many seasons. That world was about him now, he could feel its winds, hear its sounds, taste, smell. It was not a dream—the other was the dream. It had to be!

Prove it. Find the L-B, retrace the trail of yesterday past the point of the fall which had started all this. Right there was the slope down which he must have tumbled. Above, he would find the den he had been exploring when the accident had occurred.

Only—he did not find it. His mind had produced a detailed picture of that rounded depression, at the bottom of which the strong-jaw lurked. But when he reached the crown of the bluff, nowhere did he sight the mounded earth of the pit's rim. He searched carefully for a good length, both north and south. No den—no trace of one. Yet his memory told him that there had been one here yesterday.

Had he fallen elsewhere and stumbled on, dazed, to fall a second time?

Some disputant inside him said no to that. This was where he had regained consciousness yesterday and there was no den!

He faced away from the river, breathing fast. No den—was there also no L-B? If he had passed this way dazed from a former fall, surely he would have left some trace.

There was a crushed, browned plant flattened by weight. He stooped to finger the wilted leaves. Something had come in this direction. He would backtrack. Rynch gave a hunter's attention to the ground.

A half-hour later he found nothing but some odd, almost obliterated marks on grass too resilient to hold traces very long. And from them he could make

nothing.

He knew where he was, even if he did not know how he got here. The L-B—if it did exist—was to the west. He had a vivid mental picture of the rocket shape, its once silvery sides dulled by exposure, canted crookedly amid trees. And he was going to find it!

Beyond the edge of any conscious sense there was a new stir. He was contacted again, tested. A forest called delicately in its alien way. Rynch had a fleeting thought of trees, was not aware of more than a mild desire to see what lay in their shade.

For the present his own problem held him. That which beckoned was defeated, repulsed by his indifference. While Rynch started at a steady distance to trot towards the east, far away a process akin to a relay clicked into a second set of impulse orders.

* * * * *

Well above the planet Hume spun a dial to bring in the image of the wide stretches of continents, the small patches of seas. They would set down on the western land mass. Its climate, geographical features and surface provided the best site. And he had the very important co-ordinates for their camp already taped in the directo.

"That's Jumala."

He did not glance around to see what effect that screen view had on the other four men in the control cabin of the safari ship. Just now he was striving to master his impatience. The slightest hint could give birth to a suspicion which would blast their whole scheme. Wass might have had a hand in the selection of the three clients, but they would certainly be far from briefed on the truth of any discovery made on Jumala—they had to be for the safety of the whole enterprise.

The fourth man, serving as his gearman for this trip, was Wass' own insurance against any wrong move on Hume's part. And the Out-Hunter respected him as being man enough to be wary of giving any suspicion of going counter to the agreed plan.

Dawn was touching up the main points of the western continent, and he must set this spacer down within a day's journey of the abandoned L-B. Exploration in that direction would be the first logical move for his party. They could not be openly steered to the find, but there were ways of directing a hunt which would do as well.

Two days ago, according to schedule, their castaway had been deposited here with a sub-conscious command to remain in the general area. There had been a slight element of risk in leaving him alone, armed only with the crude weapons he could manipulate, but that was part of the gamble.

They were down—right on the mark. Hume saw to the unpacking and activating of those machines and appliances which would protect and serve his civ clients. He slapped the last inflate valve on a bubble tent, watched it critically as it billowed from a small roll of fabric into a weather resistant, one-room, air-conditioned and heated shelter.

"Ready and waiting for you to move in, Gentlehomo," he reported to the small man who stood gazing about him with a child's wondering interest in the new and strange.

"Very ingenious, Hunter. Ah—now just what might that be?" His voice was also eager as he pointed a finger to the east.

4

Hume glanced up alertly. There was a bare chance that "Brodie" might have witnessed their arrival and might be coming in now to save them all a great amount of time and trouble by acting the overjoyed, rescued castaway.

But he could sight nothing at all in that direction to excite any attention. The distant mountains provided a stark, dark blue background. Up their foothills and lower slopes was a thick furring of trees with foliage of so deep a green as to register black from this distance. And on the level country was the lighter blue-green of the other variety of wood edging the open country about the river. In there rested the L-B.

"I don't see anything!" he snapped, so sharply the little man stared at him in open surprise. Hume forced a quick smile.

"Just what did you sight, Gentlehomo Starns? There is no large game in the woodlands."

"This was not an animal, Hunter. Rather a flash of light, just about there." Again he pointed.

Sun, Hume thought, could have been reflected from some portion of the L-B. He had believed that small spacer so covered with vines and ringed in by trees that it could not have been so sighted. But a storm might have disposed of some of nature's cloaking. If so Starns' interest must be fed, he would make an ideal discoverer.

"Odd." Hume produced his distance glasses. "Just where, Gentlehomo?"

"There." Starns obligingly pointed a third time.

If there had been anything to see it was gone now. But it did lie in the right direction. For a second or two Hume was uneasy. Things seemed to be working too well; his cynical distrust was triggered by fitting so smoothly.

"Might be the sun," he observed.

"Reflected from some object you mean, Hunter? But the flash was very bright. And there could be no mirror surface in there, surely there could not be?"

Yes, things were moving too fast. Hume might be overly cautious but he was determined that no hint of any preknowledge of the L-B must ever come to these civs. When they would find the Largo Drift's life boat and locate Brodie, there would be a legal snarl. The castaway's identity would be challenged by a half dozen distant and unloving relatives, and there would be an intense inquiry. These civs must be the impartial witnesses.

"No, I hardly believe in a mirror in an uninhabited forest, Gentlehomo," he chuckled. "But we are on a hunting planet and not all its life forms have yet

been classified."

"You are thinking of an intelligent native race, Hunter?" Chambriss, the most demanding of the civ party, strode up to join them.

Hume shook his head. "No native intelligence on a hunting world, Gentlehomo. That is assured before the planet is listed for a safari. However, a bird or flying thing, perhaps with metallic plumage or scales to catch the sunlight, might under the right circumstances seem a flash of light. That has happened before."

"It was very bright," Starns said doubtfully. "We might look over there later."

"Nonsense!" Chambriss spoke briskly as one used to overriding the conflicting wishes in any company. "I came here for a water-cat, and a water-cat I'm going to have. You don't find those in wooded areas."

"There will be a schedule," Hume announced. "Each of you has signed up, according to contract, for a different trophy. You for a water-cat, Gentlehomo. And you, Gentlehomo Starns, want to make tri-dees of the pit-dragons. While Gentlehomo Yactisi wishes to try electo fishing in the deep holes. To alternate days is the fair way. And, who knows, each of you may discover your own choice near the other man's stake out."

"You are quite right, Hunter," Starns nodded. "And since my two colleagues have chosen to try for a water creature, perhaps we should start along the river."

It was two days, then, before they could work their way into the woods. One part of Hume protested, the more cautious section of his mind was appeased. He saw, beyond the three clients now turning over and sorting space bags, Wass' man glanced at the woods and then back to Starns. And, being acutely aware of all undercurrents here, Hume wondered what the small civ had actually seen.

The camp was complete, a cluster of seven bubble tents not too far from the ship. At least this crowd did not appear to consider that the Hunter was there to do all the serious moving and storing of supplies. All three of the clients pitched in to help, and Wass' man went down to the river to return with half a dozen silver-fins cleaned and threaded on a reed, ready to broil over the cook unit.

A fire in the night was not needed except to afford the proper stage setting. But it was enjoyed. Hume leaned forward to feed the flames, and Starns pushed some lengths of driftwood closer.

"You have said, Hunter, that hunting worlds never contain intelligent native life. Unless the planet is minutely explored how can your survey teams be sure of that fact?" His voice bordered on the pedantic, but his interest was plain.

"By using the verifier." Hume sat crosslegged, his plasta-hand resting on one knee. "Fifty years ago, we would have had to keep rather a lengthy watch to be sure of a free world. Now, we plant verifiers at suitable test points. Intelligence means mental activity of some sort—any of which would be recorded

on the verifier."

"Amazing!" Starns extended his plump hands to the flames in the immemorial gesture of a human attracted not only to the warmth of the burning wood, but to its promise of security against the forces of the dark. "No matter how few, or how scattered your native thinkers may be, you record them without missing any?"

Hume shrugged. "Maybe one or two," he grinned, "might get through such a screening. But we have yet to discover a planet with such a sparse native life as that at the level of intelligence."

Yactisi juggled a cup in and out of the firelight. "I agree, this is most interesting." He was a thin man, with scanty drab gray hair and dark skin, perhaps the result of the mingling of several human races. His eyes were slightly sunken, so that it was difficult in this light to read their expression. He was, Hume had already decided, a class one brain and observant to a degree, which could either be a help or a menace. "There have been no cases of failure?"

"None reported," Hume returned. All his life he had relied on machines operating, of course, under the competent domination of men trained to use them properly. He understood the process of the verifier, had seen it at work. At the Guild Headquarters there were no records of its failure; he was willing to believe it was infallible.

"A race residing in the sea now—could you be sure your machine would discover its presence?" Starns continued to question.

Hume laughed. "Not to be found on Jumala, you may be sure of that—the seas here are small and shallow. Such, not to be picked up by the verifier, would have to exist at great depths and never venture on land. So we need not fear any surprises here. The Guild takes no chances."

"As it always continues to assure one," Yactisi replied. "The hour grows late. I wish you rewarding dreams." He arose to go to his own bubble tent.

"Yes, indeed!" Starns blinked at the fire and then scrambled up in turn. "We hunt along the river, then, tomorrow?"

"For water-cat," Hume agreed. Of the three, he believed Chambriss the most impatient. Might as well let him pot his trophy as soon as possible. The ex-pilot deduced there would be little cooperation in exploration from that client until he was satisfied in his own quest.

Rovald, Wass' man, lingered by the fire until the three civs were safe in their bubbles.

"River range tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes. We can't rush the deal."

"Agreed." Rovald spoke with a curtness he did not use when the civs were present. "Only don't delay too long. Remember, our boy's roaming around out there. He might just be picked off by something before these stumble-footed civs catch up with him."

"That's the chance we knew we'd have to take. We don't dare raise any suspicion. Yactisi, for one, is no fool, neither is Starns. Chambriss just wants to get his water-cat, but he could become nasty if anyone tried to steer him."

"Too long a wait might run us into trouble. Wass doesn't like trouble."

Hume spun around. In the half light of the fire his features were set, his mouth grim. "Neither do I, Rovald, neither do I!" he said softly, but with an icy promise beneath the words.

Rovald was not to be intimidated. He grinned. "Set your fins down, fly-boy. You need Wass—and I'm here to hold his stakes for him. This is a big deal, we won't want any misses!"

"There won't be any—not from my side." Hume stepped away from the fire, approached a post which gleamed with a dull, red line of fire down either side. He pressed a control button. That red line flared into a streak of brilliance. Now encircling the bubble tents and the space ship was a force field: routine protection of a safari camp on a strange world and one Hume had set as a matter of course.

He stood for a long moment staring through that invisible barrier toward the direction of the wood. It was a dark night, there were scudding clouds to hide the stars, which meant rain probably before morning. This was no time to be plagued by uncertain weather.

Somewhere out there Brodie was holed up. He hoped the boy had long ago reached the "camp" so carefully erected and left for his occupancy. The L-B, that stone covered "grave" showing signs of several years' occupancy, was all assembled and constructed to the last small detail. Far less might have deceived the civs in this safari. But as soon as the story of their find leaked, there would be others on the scene, men trained to assess the signs of a castaway's fight for survival. His own Guild training and the ability of Wass' renegade techs should bring them through that test.

What had Starns seen? The glint of sun on the tail of the L-B, tilted now to the sky? Hume walked slowly back to the fire, when he saw Rovald going up the ramp into the spacer. He smiled. Did Wass think he was stupid enough not to guess that the Veep's man would be in com touch with his employer? Rovald was about to report along some channel of the shadow world that they had landed and that the play was about to begin. Hume wondered idly how far and through how many relays that message would pass before it reached its destination.

He stretched and yawned, moving to his sleeping pad. Tomorrow they must find Chambriss a water-cat. Hume shoved Brodie into the back of his mind to center his thoughts on the various ways of delivering, to the waiting sportsman, a fair-sized alien feline.

The lights in the bubbles went out one by one. Within the circle barrier of the force field men slept. And by midnight the rain began to fall, streaming down the sides of the bubbles, soaking the ashes of the fire.

Out of the dark crept that which was not thought, not substance, but alien to the off-world men. But the barrier, meant to deter multi-footed creatures, with wings or no visible limbs at all, proved to be a better protection than its

creators had hoped. There was no penetration—only a baffled butting of one force against another. And then the probe withdrew as undetected as it had come.

Only, the thing which had no intelligence, as humankind rated intelligence, did possess the ability to fathom the nature of that artificial barrier. The force field was examined, its nature digested. First approach had failed. The second was now ready—ready as it had not been months before when the first coming of these creatures had alerted the very ancient watchdog on Jumala.

Deep in the darker woods on the mountain sides there was a stirring. Things whimpered in their sleep, protested subconsciously commands they could never understand, only obey. With the coming of dawn there would be a marshaling of hosts, a new assault—not on the camp, but on any leaving its protection. And also on the boy now sleeping in a shallow cave formed by the swept roots of a tree—a tree which had crashed when the L-B landed.

Again, fortune favored Hume. With the dawn the rain was over. There was a cloudy sky overhead, but he believed the day would clear. The roily, rushing water of the river would aid Chambriss' quest. Water-cats holed up in the banks, but rising water often forced them out of such dens. A course parallel to the stream bed could well show them the tracks of one of the felines.

They started off in a group, Hume leading, with Chambriss treading briskly behind him, Rovald bringing up the rear in the approved trail technique. Chambriss carried a needler, Starns was unarmed except for a small protection stunner, his tri-dee box slung on his chest by well-worn carrying straps. Yactisi shouldered an electric pole, wore its control belt buckled about his middle, though Hume had warned him that the storm would prevent any deep hole fishing.

Only a short distance from the campsite they came upon the unmistakable marks of a water-cat's broad paws, pressed in so heavy and distinct a pattern that Hume knew the animal could not be far ahead. The indentations were deep, and he measured the distance between them with the length of his hand.

"Big one!" Chambriss exclaimed in satisfaction. "Going away from the river, too."

That point puzzled Hume slightly. The red coated felines might be washed out of their burrows, but they did not willingly head so sharply away from the water. He squatted on his heels and surveyed the stretch of countryside between them and the distant wood with care.

The grass was this season's, still growing, not tall enough to afford cover for an animal with paws as large as these prints. There were two clumps of brush. It could have holed up in either, waiting to attack any trailer—but why? It had not been wounded, nor frightened by their party, there was no reason for it to set an ambush on its back trail.

Starns and Yactisi dropped back, though Starns was fussing with his tri-

dee. Rovald caught up. He had drawn his ray tube in answer to Hume's hand wave. Any action foreign to the regular habits of an animal was to be mistrusted.

Getting to his feet Hume paced along the line of marks. They were fresh—hot fresh. And they still led in a straight line for the woods. With another wave of his hand he stopped Chambriss. The civ was trained in spite of his eagerness and obeyed. Hume left the tracks, made a detour which brought him to a point from which he could study those clumps of brush. No sign except that line of prints pointed to the woods. And if the party kept on, they might well come upon the L-B!

He decided to risk it. But when they were less than a couple of yards from the tree fringe his hand shot up to direct Chambriss to fire towards the quivering bush.

Only, that formless half seen thing, hardly to be distinguished in color from the vegetation, was no water-cat. There was a thin, ragged cry. Then the creature plunged backward, was gone.

"What in the name of nine Gods was that?" Chambriss demanded.

"I don't know." Hume went forward, jerked the needler dart from a tree trunk. "But don't shoot again—not unless you are sure of what you are aiming at!"

5

Moisture from the night's rain hung on the tree leaves, clung in globules to Rynch's sweating body. He lay on a wide branch trying to control the heavy panting which supplied his laboring lungs. And he could still hear the echoes of the startled cries which had come from the men who had threaded through the woods to the up-pointed tail fins of the L-B.

Now he tried to reason why he had run. They were his own kind, they would take him out of the loneliness of a world heretofore empty of his species. But that tall man—the one who had led the party into the irregular clearing about the life boat—

Rynch shivered, dug his nails into the wood on which he lay. At the sight of that man, dream and reality had crashed together, sending him into panic-stricken flight. That was the man from the room—the man with the cup!

As his heart quieted he began to think more coherently. First, he had not been able to find the strong-jaws's den. Then the marks on the ground at the point from which he had fallen and the L-B were here, just as he remembered. But not far from the small ship he had discovered something more—a campsite with a shelter fashioned out of spalls and vines, containing possessions a castaway might have accumulated.

That man would come, Rynch was sure of that, but he was too spent to struggle on.

No, the answer to every part of the puzzle lay with that man. To go back to the ship clearing was to risk capture—but he had to know. Rynch looked with more attention at his present surroundings. Deep mold under the trees here would hold tracks. There might just be

another way to move. He eyed the spread of limbs on a neighbor tree.

His journey through those heights was awkward and he sweated and cringed when he disturbed vocal tree-top dwellers. He was also to discover that close to the site of the L-B crash others waited.

He huddled against the bole of a tree when he made out the curve of a round bulk holding tight to the tree trunk aloft. Though it was balled in upon itself he was sure the creature was fully as large as he, and the menacing claws suggested it was a formidable opponent.

When it made no move to follow him Rynch began to hope it had only been defending its own hiding place, for its present attitude suggested concealment.

Still facing that featureless blob in the tree, the man retreated, alert for the first sign of advance on the part of the creature above. None came, and he dared to slip around the bole of the tree under which he stood, listening intently for any corresponding movement overhead. Now he was facing that survivor's camp.

Another object crouched in the dark of the lean-to shelter, just as its fellow was on sentry duty in the tree! Only this one did not have the self-color of the foliage to disguise it. Four-limbed, its long forearms curved about its bent knees, its general outline almost that of a human—if a human went clothed in a thick fuzz. The head hunched right against the shoulders as if the neck were very short, or totally lacking, was pear-shaped, with the longer end to the back, and the sense organs of eyes and nose squeezed together on the lower quarter of the rounded portion, with a line of wide mouth to split the blunt round of the muzzle. Dark pits for eyes showed no pupil, iris, or cornea. The nose was a black, perfectly rounded tube jutting an inch or so beyond the cheek surface. Grotesque, alien and terrifying, it made no hostile move. And, since it had not turned its head, he could not be sure it had even sighted him. But it knew he was there, he was certain of that. And was waiting—for what? As the long seconds crawled by Rynch began to believe that it was not waiting for him. Heartened, he pulled at the vine loop, climbed back into the tree.

Minutes later he discovered that there were more than two of the beasts waiting quietly about the camp, and that their sentry line ran between him and the clearing of the L-B. He withdrew farther into the wood, intent upon finding a detour which would bring him out into the open lands. Now he wanted to join forces with his own kind, whether those men were potential enemies or not.

As time passed the beasts closed about the clearing of the camp. Afternoon was fading into evening when he reached a point several miles downstream near the river. Since he had come into the open he had not sighted any of the watchers. He hoped they did not willingly venture out of the trees where the leaves were their protection.

Rynch went flat on the stream bank, made a worm's progress up the slope to crouch behind a bush and survey the

land immediately ahead. There stood an off-world spacer, fins down, nose skyward, and grouped not too far from its landing ramp, a collection of bubble tents. A fire burned in their midst and men were moving about it.

Now that he was free from the wood and its watchers and had come so near to his goal, Rynch was curiously reluctant to do the sensible thing, to rise out of concealment and walk up to that fire, to claim rescue by his own kind.

The man he sought stood by the fire, shrugging his arms into a webbing harness which brought a box against his chest. Having made that fast he picked up a needler by its sling. By their gestures the others were arguing with him, but he shook his head, came on, to be a shadow stalking among other shadows. One of the men trailed him, but as they reached a post planted a little beyond the bubble tents he stopped, allowed the explorer to advance alone into the dark.

Rynch went to cover under a bush. The man was heading to the stream bed. Had they somehow learned of his own presence nearby, were they out to find him? But the preparations the tall man had made seemed more suited to going on patrol. The watchers! Was the other out to spy on them? That idea made sense. And in the meantime he would let the other past him, follow along behind until he was far enough from the camp so that his friends could not interfere—then, they would have a meeting!

Rynch's fingers balled into fists. He would find out what was real, what was a dream in this crazy, mixed up mind of his! That other would know, and would tell him the truth!

Alert as he was, he lost sight of the stranger who melted into the dusky cover of the shadows. Then came a quiet ripple of water close to his own hiding place. The man from the spacer camp was using the stream as his road.

In spite of his caution Rynch was close to betrayal as he edged around a clump of vegetation growing half in, half out of the stream. Only a timely rustle told him that the other had sat down on a drift log.

Waiting for him? Rynch froze, so startled that he could not think clearly for a second. Then he noted that the outline of the other's body was visible, growing brighter by the moment.

Minute particles of pale-greenish radiance were gathering about the other. The dark shadow of an arm flapped, the radiance swirled, broke again into pinpoint sparks.

Rynch glanced down at his own body—the same sparks were drifting in about him, edging his arms, thighs, chest. He pushed back into the bushes while the sparks still flitted, but they no longer gathered in strength enough to light his presence. Now he could see they drifted about the vegetation, about the log where the man sat, about rocks and reeds. Only they were thicker about the stranger as if his body were a magnet. He continued to keep them whirling by means of waving hand and arm, but there was enough light to show

Rynch the fingers of his other hand, busy on the front panel of the box he wore.

That fingering stopped, then Rynch's head came up as he heard a very faint sound. Not a beast's cry—or was it?

Again those fingers moved on the panel. Was the other sending a message by that means? Rynch watched him check the webbing, count the equipment at his belt, settle the needler in the crook of his arm. Then the stranger left the stream, headed towards the woods.

Rynch jumped to his feet, a cry of warning shaping, but not to be uttered. He padded after the other. There was plenty of time to stop the man before he reached the danger which might lurk under the trees.

However the other was as wary of that dark as if he suspected what might lie in wait there. He angled along northward, avoiding clumps of scattered brush, keeping in the open where Rynch dared not tail him too closely.

Their course, parallel to the woods, brought them at last to a second stream, the size of a river, into which the first creek emptied. Here the other settled down between two rocks with every indication of remaining there for a period.

Thankfully Rynch found his own lurking place from which he could keep the other in sight. The light points gathered, hung in a small luminous cloud over the rocks. But Rynch had prudently withdrawn under a bush, and the scent of its aromatic leaves must have discouraged the sparks, for no such crown came to his sentry post.

Drugged with fatigue, the younger man slept, awaking to full day, a fog of bewilderment and disorientation. To open his eyes to this blue-green pocket instead of to four dirty walls, was wrong.

Remembering, he started up and slunk down the slope, angry at his failure. He found the other's track, not turning back as he had half feared, cleanly printed on level spots of wet earth—eastward now. What was the purpose of the other's expedition? Was he going to use the open cut through which the river ran as a way of penetrating the wooded country?

Now Rynch considered the problem from his own angle. The man from the spacer had made no effort to conceal his trail, in fact it would almost seem that he had deliberately gone out of his way to leave boot prints on favorable stretches of ground. Did he guess that Rynch lurked behind, was now leading him on for some purpose of his own? Or were those traces left to guide another party from the camp?

To advance openly up the stream bed was to invite discovery. Rynch surveyed the nearer bank. Clumps of small trees and high growing bushes dotted that expanse, an ideal cover.

He was hardly out of sight of the bush which had sheltered him when he heard the coughing roar of a water-cat. And the feline was attacking an enemy, enraged to the pitch of vocal frenzy. Rynch ran a zigzag course from one clump of bush to the next. That sound of snarling, spitting hate ended in mid-cry as Rynch crawled to the river bank.

The man from the spacer camp had been the focus of a three-prong attack from a female and her cubs. Three red bodies were flat and still on the gravel as the off-worlder leaned back against a rock breathing heavily. As Rynch sighted him, he stooped to recover the needler he had dropped, lurched away from the rock towards the water, and so blundered straight into another Jumalan trap.

His unsteady foot advancing for another step came down on a slippery surface, and he fell forward as his legs were engulfed in the trap burrow of a strong-jaws. With a startled cry the man dropped the needler again, clawed at the ground about him. Already he was buried to his knees, then his mid-thighs, in the artificial quicksand. But he had not lost his head and was jerking from side to side in an effort to pull free.

Rynch got to his feet, walked with slow deliberation down to the river's brink. The trapped prisoner had shied halfway around, stretching out his arms to find a firmer grip on some rock large and heavy enough to anchor him. After his first startled cry he had made no sound, but now, as he sighted Rynch, his eyes widened and his lips parted.

The box on his chest caught on a stone he had dragged to him in a desperate try for support. There was a spitting of sparks and the stranger worked frantically at the buckle of the webbing harness to loosen it and toss the whole thing from him. The box struck one of the dead water-cats, flashed as fur and flesh were singed.

Rynch watched dispassionately before he caught the needler, jerking it away from the prisoner. The man eyed him steadily, and his expression did not alter even when Rynch swung the off-world weapon to center its sights on the late owner.

"Suppose," Rynch's voice was rusty sounding in his own ears, "we talk now."

The man nodded. "As you wish, Brodie."

6

"Brodie?" Rynch squatted on his heels.

Those gray eyes, so light in the other's deeply tanned face, narrowed the smallest fraction, Rynch noted with an inner surge of triumph.

"Were you looking for me?" he added.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"We found an L-B—we wondered if there were survivors."

Slowly Rynch shook his head. "No—you knew I was here. Because you brought me!" He fashioned his suspicions into one quick thrust.

This time there was not the slightest hint of self-betrayal from the other.

"You see," Rynch leaned forward, but still well out of reach from the captive, "I remember!"

Now there was a faint flicker of answer in the man's eyes. He asked quietly:

"What do you remember, Brodie?"

"Enough to know that I am not

Brodie. That I did not get here on the L-B, did not build that camp."

He ran one hand over the stock of the needler. Whatever motive lay behind this weird game into which he had been unwillingly introduced, he was now sure that it was serious enough to be dangerous.

"You have no cup this time."

"So you do remember." The other accepted that calmly. "All right. That need not necessarily spoil our plans. You have nothing to return to on Nahuatl—unless you liked the Starfall." His voice was icy with contempt. "To play our roles will be for your advantage, too." He paused, his gaze centering on Rynch with the intensity of one willing the desired answer out of his inferior.

Nahuatl. Rynch caught at that. He had been on or in Nahuatl—a planet? a city? If he could make this man believe he remembered everything clearly, more than just the scattered patches that he did....

"You had me planted here, then came back to hunt me. Why? What makes Rynch Brodie so important?"

"Close to a billion credits!" The man from the spacer leaned well back in the hole, his arms spread flat out on either side to keep his body from sinking deeper. "A billion credits," he repeated softly.

Rynch laughed. "You'll have to think of a better one than that, fly-boy."

"The stakes would have to be high, wouldn't they, for us to go to all this staging? You've been conditioned, Brodie, illegally brain-channeled!"

To Rynch the words meant nothing. If they ever had, that was gone, lost in the maze of other things which had been blotted out of his mind by the Brodie past. But he would not give the other the advantage of knowing his uncertainty.

"You need a Brodie for a billion credits. But you don't have a Brodie now!"

To his surprise the prisoner in the earth trap laughed. "I'll have a Brodie when he's needed. Think about a good share of a billion credits, boy, keep thinking of that hard."

"I will."

"Thoughts alone won't work it, you know." For the first time there was a hint of some emotion in the man's voice.

"You mean I need you? I don't think so. I've stopped being a plaque for someone to play across the board." That expression brought another momentary flash of hazy memory—a smoky, crowded room where men slid counters back and forth across tables—not one of Brodie's edited recalls, but his own.

Rynch stood up, started for the rise of the slope, but before he topped that he glanced back. The damaged com box still smoked where its wearer had flung it. Now the man was already straining forward with both arms, trying to reach a rock just a finger space beyond. Lucky for him the burrow was an old one, uninhabited. In time he should be able to work his way out. Meanwhile there was the whole of a wide countryside in which Rynch could discover a hideout—no one would find him now

against his will.

He tried, as he strode along, to piece together more of his memories and the scanty information he had had from the Nahuatl man. So he had been "brain-channeled," given a set of false memories to fit a Rynch Brodie whose presence on this world meant a billion credits for someone. He could not believe that this was the spaceman's game alone, for hadn't he spoken of "we"?

A billion credits! The sum was fantastic, the whole story unbelievable.

There was a hot stab of pain on his instep. Rynch cried out, stamped hard. One of the clawed scavengers was crushed. The man leaped back in time to avoid another step into a swarming mass of them at work on some unidentifiable carrion. Staring down at the welter of scaled, segmented bodies and busy claws, he gasped.

Three dead water-cats were near the man trapped in the pit. Bait to draw these voracious eaters straight to the prisoner. Rynch's empty stomach heaved. He swung around, ran across the grassy verge of the upper bank, hoping he was not too late.

As he half fell, half slid down to the water, he saw that the man had managed to hook the webbing of the smouldering box to him, was casting it out and dragging it back patiently, aiming at the nearest rock of size, fruitlessly attempting to hitch its straps over the round of stone.

Rynch dashed on, caught at that loop of webbing, and dug his heels into the loose gravel as he began a steady pull. With his aid the other crawled out, lay panting. Rynch grabbed the man's shoulder, jerked him away from the body of the female water-cat. He was sure he had seen a telltale scurrying around the smaller of the dead cubs.

The man straightened, glanced toward Rynch who was backing off, the needler up and ready between them.

"My turn to ask why?"

Then his gaze followed Rynch's. The smallest cub twitched from side to side. Not with any faint trace of life, but under the attack of the scavengers. More scuttled towards the second cub.

"Thanks!" The stranger was on his feet. "My name is Ras Hume. I don't think I told you that when we last met."

"This doesn't make any difference. I'm not your man, not Brodie!"

Hume shrugged. "You think about it, Brodie, think about it with care. Come back to camp with me and—"

"No!" Rynch interrupted. "You go your way, I go mine from here on."

Again the other laughed. "Not so simple as all that, boy. We've started something which can't just be turned off as easily as you snap down a switch." He took a step or two in Rynch's direction.

The younger man brought up the needler. "Stay right where you are! Your game, Hume? All right, you play it—but not with me."

"And what are you going to do, take to the woods?"

"What I do is my business, Hume."

"No, my business, too, very much

so. I'm giving you a warning, boy, in return for your help here." He nodded at the pit. "There's something in that woods—something which didn't show up when the Guild had their survey exploration here."

"The watchers." Rynch retreated step by step, keeping the needler ready. "I saw them."

"You've seen them!" Hume was eager. "What do they look like?"

In spite of his desire to be rid of Hume, Rynch found himself answering that in detail, discovering that on demand he could recall minutely the description of the animal hiding in the tree, the one who had waited in the shelter, and those he had glimpsed drawing in about the L-B clearing.

"No intelligence." Hume turned his head to survey the distant wood. "The verifier reported no intelligence."

"These watchers—you don't know them?"

"No. Nor do I like what you've seen of them, Brodie. So I'm willing to call a truce. The Guild believed Jumala an open planet, our records accredited it so. If that is not true we may be in for bad trouble. As an Out-Hunter I am responsible for the safety of three civs back there in the safari camp."

Hume made sense, much as Rynch disliked admitting it. And the Hunter must have read something of his agreement in his face for now he nodded and added briskly:

"Best place now is the safari camp. We'll head back at once."

Only time had run out. A noise sounded with a metallic ring. Rynch whirled, needler cocked. A glittering ball about the size of his fist rolled away from contact with a boulder, came to rest in the deep depression of one of Hume's boot tracks. Then another flash through the air, a clatter as a second ball spun across a patch of gravel.

The balls seemed to appear out of the air. Displaying rainbow glints they rolled in a semicircle about the two men. Rynch stooped, then Hume's fingers latched about his wrist, dragging his hand away from the globe. It was only then that he realized that sharp action had detached his attention from that ball he had wanted to take up.

"Don't touch!" Hume barked. "And don't look at that too closely! Come along!" He pulled Rynch forward through the yet unclosed arc of the globe circle.

Hume detoured around the feasting scavengers and brought Rynch with him at a trot. They could hear behind them the plop and tinkle of more globes. Glancing back Rynch saw one fall close to the bodies of the water-cats.

"Wait a minute!" He pulled back against Hume's hold. Here was a chance to see what effect that crystal had on the clawed carrion eater.

There was a change in the crystal: Yellow now, then red—red as the few scraps of fur remaining on the rapidly disappearing body.

"Look!"

The pulsating carpet which had covered the dead feline ceased to move. But towards that spot rolled two more of

the globes, approaching the scavengers. Now the clawed things were stirring, dropping away from their prey. They spread out in a patch, moved purposefully forward. Behind them, as guardians might head a flock, rolled three globes, flushing scarlet, then more.

Hume's hand came up. From the cone tip of the ray tube spat a lance of fire, to strike the middle crystal. The beam was reflected into the block of scavengers. Scaled bodies, twisted, crisped, were ash. But the crystal continued to roll at the same pace.

"Move!" Hume's other hand hit Rynch's shoulder, knocked him forward in an impetuous shove which nearly took him off his feet. Both men began to run.

"What—what are those things?" Rynch appealed between panting breaths.

"I don't know—and I don't like their looks. They're between us and the safari camp if we keep to the river—"

"Between us and the river now." Rynch saw that glittering swoop through the air, marked the landing of a ball near the water's edge.

"Might be trying to box us in. But that's not going to work. See—ahead there where that log's caught between two rocks? Run out on that when we reach there and take to the water. I don't think those things can float and if they sink to the bottom that ought to fix them as far as we are concerned."

Rynch ran, still holding the needler. He balanced along the drift log Hume had pointed out and a jump sent him floundering in the brown stream thigh deep. Hume joined him, his face grim.

"Downstream—"

Rynch looked. One shape—two—three—Clearly detailed where matching vegetation gave them no covering camouflage, the watchers had come out of the woods at last. A line of them were walking quietly and upright towards the humans, their blue-green fuzz covering like a mist under the direct rays of the sun. Quiet as they seemed at present, the things out of the Jumalan forest were a picture of sheer brute strength as they moved.

"Let's get out of here—fast!"

The men kept moving, and always after them padded that silent line of green-blue, pushing them farther and farther away from the safari camp, on towards the rising mountain peaks. Just as the globes had shaken the scavengers loose from their meal and sent them marching on, so were the humans being herded for some unknown purpose.

At least, once the march of the beasts began, they saw and heard no more of the globes. And as they reached a curve in the river, Hume stopped, swung around, stood studying the line of decorously pacing animals.

"We can pick them off with the needler or the ray."

The Hunter shook his head. "You don't kill," he recited the credo of his Guild, "not until you are sure. There is a method behind this, and method means intelligence."

Handling of X-tee creatures and peoples was a part of Guild training. In spite of his devious game here on Jumala, Hume was Guild educated and Rynch was willing to leave such decisions to him.

The other held out the ray tube. "Take this, cover me, but don't use it until I say so. Understand?"

He waited only for Rynch's nod before he started, at a deliberate pace which matched that of the beasts, back through the river shallows to meet them. But that advancing line halted, stood waiting in silence. Hume's hands went up, palm out, he spoke slowly in Basic-X-Tee clicks:

"Friend." This was all Rynch could make out of that sing-song of syllables Rynch knew to be a contact pattern.

The dark eye pits continued to stare. A light breeze ruffled the fuzz covering of wide shoulders, long muscular arms. Not a head moved, not one of those heavy, rounded jaws opened to emit any answering sound. Hume halted. The silence was threatening, a portending atmosphere spread from the alien things as might a tangible wave.

For perhaps two breaths they stood so, man facing alien. Then Hume turned, walked back, his face set. Rynch offered him the ray tube.

"Fight our way out?"

"Too late. Look!"

Moving lines of blue-green coming down to the river. Not five or six now—a dozen—twenty. There was a small trickle of moisture down the side of the Hunter's brown face.

"We're penned—except straight ahead."

"But we're going to fight!" Rynch protested.

"No. Move on!"

7

It was some time before Hume found what he wanted, an islet in midstream lacking any growth and rising to a rough pinnacle. The sides were seamed with crevices and caves which promised protection for one's back in any desperate struggle. And they had discovered it none too soon, for the late afternoon shadows were lengthening.

There had been no attack, just the trailing to herd the men to the northeast. And Rynch had lost the first tight pinch of panic, though he knew the folly of underestimating the unknown.

They climbed with unspoken consent, going clear to the top, where they huddled together on a four-foot tableland. Hume unhooked his distance lenses, but it was toward the rises of the mountains that he aimed them, not along the back trail.

Rynch wriggled about, studied the river and its banks. The beasts there were quiet, blue-green lumps, standing down on the river bank or squatting in the grass.

"Nothing." Hume lowered the lenses, held them before his broad chest as he still watched the peaks.

"What did you expect?" Rynch snapped. He was hungry, but not hungry enough to abandon the islet.

Hume laughed shortly. "I don't

know. Only I'm sure they are heading us in that direction."

"Look here," Rynch rounded on him. "You know this planet, you've been here before."

"I was one of the survey team that approved it for the Guild."

"Then you must have combed it pretty thoroughly. How is it that you didn't know about them?" He gestured to their pursuers.

"That is what I would like to ask a few assorted experts right about now," Hume returned. "The verifiers registered no intelligent native life here."

"No native life." Rynch chewed that over, came up with the obvious explanation. "All right—so then maybe our blue-backed friends are imported. Suppose someone's running a private business of his own here and wants to get rid of visitors?"

Hume looked thoughtful. "No." He did not enlarge upon his negative. Sitting down he pulled a cylinder container from a belt loop and shook out four tablets, handing two to Rynch, mouthing the others.

"Vita-blocks—good for twenty-four hours sustenance."

The iron rations depended upon by all exploring services did not have the satisfying taste of real food. However Rynch swallowed them dutifully before he descended with Hume to river level. The Hunter splashed water from the stream into a depression in the rock and dropped a pinch of clarifying powder into it.

"With the dark," he announced, "we might be able to get through their lines."

"You believe that?"

Hume laughed. "No—but one doesn't overlook the factor of sheer luck. Also, I don't care to finish up at the place they may have chosen for us." He tilted his chin to study the sky. "We'll take watches and rest in turn. No use trying anything until it is dark—unless they start to move in. You take the first one?"

As Rynch nodded, Hume edged back into a crevice as a shelled creature withdrawing to natural protection, going to sleep as easily as if he could control that state by will. Rynch, watching him curiously for a second or two before climbing up to a position from which he judged he could see all sides of their refuge, determined not to be surprised.

The watchers were crouched down, waiting with that patience which had impressed him from his first sight of the camp sentries back in the forest. There was no movement, no sound. They were simply there—on guard. And Rynch did not believe that the darkness of night would bring any relaxation of that vigilance.

He leaned back, feeling the grit of the rocky surface against his bare back and shoulders. Under his hand was the most efficient and formidable weapon known to the frontier worlds, from this post he could keep the enemy under surveillance and think.

Hume had had him planted here, in the first place, provided with the memory of Rynch Brodie—the reward

for him was to be a billion credits. Too much staff work had gone into his conditioning for just a small stake.

So Rynch Brodie was on Jumala, and Hume had come with witnesses to find him. Another part of his mind stood aloof now, applauding the clearness of his reasoning. Rynch Brodie was to be discovered a castaway on Jumala. Only, matters had not worked out according to Hume's plan. In the first place he was certain he had not been intended to know that he was not Rynch Brodie. For a fleeting second he wondered why that conditioning had not completely worked, then went back to the problem of his relationship with Hume.

No, the Out-Hunter had expected a castaway who would be just what he ordered. Then this affair of the watchers—creatures the Guild men had not found here a few months ago—Rynch felt a small cold chill along his spine. Hume's game was one thing, something he could understand, but the silent beasts were another and somehow far more disturbing threat.

Rynch edged forward, watching the mist on the water, his brain striving to solve this other puzzle as neatly as he thought he had discovered the reason for his scrambled memories and his being on Jumala.

The mist was an added danger. Thick enough and those watchers could move in under its curtain. A needler was efficient, yes, but it could wipe out only an enemy at which it was aimed. Blind cross sweeping with its darts would only exhaust the clip without results, save by lucky chance.

On the other hand, suppose they could turn that same gray haze to their own advantage—use it to blanket their withdrawal? He was about to go to Hume with that suggestion when he sighted the new move in their odd battle with the aliens.

A wink of light—two more—blinking, following the erratic course by the pull of the stream. All bobbing along toward the rugged coastline of the islet. Those had appeared out of nothingness as suddenly as the globes when this chase had begun.

The globes and the winking lights on the water connected in his mind, argued new danger. Rynch took careful aim, fired a dart at one which had grounded on the pointed tip of the rocks where the river current came together after its division about the island. For the first time Rynch realized those things below were moving against the current—they had come upstream as if propelled.

He had fired and the light was still there, two more coming in behind it, so that now there was an irregular cluster of them. And there was activity on the water-washed rocks before them. Just as the scavengers had moved ahead of the globes on land, so now aquatic creatures had come out of the river, were flopping higher on the islet. And those lights were changing color—from white to reddish-yellow.

Rynch scrabbled with one hand in a rock crevice, found a stone he had noted earlier. He hurled that at the cluster of

lights. There was a puff of brilliant red, one was gone. Something flopping on the rocks gave a mewling cry and somersaulted back into the water. Then a finger of mist drew between Rynch and the lights which were now only faint, glowing patches. He swung down from his perch, shook Hume awake.

The Out-Hunter made that instant return to full consciousness which was another defense for the men who live long on the rim of wild worlds.

"What—?"

Rynch pulled him forward. The mist had thickened, but there were more of those ominous lights at water level, spreading down both sides of the point, forming a wall. Dark forms moved out of the water ahead of them, flopping on the rocks, pressing higher, towards the ledge where the men stood.

"Those globes—I think they're moving in the river now." Rynch found another stone, took careful aim, and smashed a second one. "The needler has no effect on them," he reported. "Stones do—but I don't know why."

They searched about them in the crevices for more ammunition, laying up a line of fist-sized rocks, while the lights gathered in, spreading farther and farther down the shores of the islet. Hume cried out suddenly, and aimed his ray tube below. The lance of its blast cut the dark as might a bolt of lightning.

With a shrill squeal, a blot shadow detached from the slope immediately below them. A vile, musky scent, now mingled with the stench of burning flesh, set them coughing.

"Water spider!" Hume identified. "If they are driving those out and up at...."

He fumbled at his equipment belt and then tossed an object downward to disintegrate in a shower of fiery sparks. Wherever those sparks touched rock or ground they flared up in tall thin columns of fire, lighting up the nightmare on the rocks and up the ledges.

Rynch fired the needler, Hume's ray tube flashed and flashed again. Things squealed, or grunted, or died silently, while clawing to reach the upper ledges. He could not be sure of the nature of some of those things. One, armed and clawed as the scavengers, was nearly as large as a water-cat. And a furry, man-legged creature, with a double-jawed head, bore also a ring of phosphorescent eyes set in a complete circle about its skull. They were alien life routed out of the water.

"The lights—smash the lights!" Hume ordered.

Rynch understood. The lights had driven these attackers out of the river. Put out the lights and the boiling broth of water dwellers might conceivably return to their homes. He dropped the needler, took up stones and set about the business of finishing off as many of the lights as he could.

Hume fired into the crawling mass, pausing only once to send another of those flame bombs crashing to illuminate the scene. The water creatures bewildered, clumsy out of their element, were so far at his mercy. But their numbers, in spite of the piling dead, were still a dangerous threat.

Rynch tore gapping holes in that line of lights. But he could see, through the mist, more floating sparks, gathering to take their places, perhaps herding before them more water things to attack. Except for those few gaps he had wrought, the islet was now completely enveloped.

"Ahhhh—" Hume's voice arose in a roar of anger and defiance. He stabbed his ray down at a spot just below their ledge. A huge segmented, taloned leg kicked, caught on the edge of the stone at the level of their feet, twisted aloft again and was gone.

"Up!" Hume ordered. "To the top!"

Rynch caught up two handsful of stones, holding them to his chest with his left arm as he made a last cast to see one light puff out in answer. Then they both scrambled on to that small platform at the top of the islet. By the aid of the burning flame-torches the Hunter had set, they could see that most of the rocky slopes below them now squirmed with a horrible mass of water life.

Where Hume had fired his ray there was fierce activity, as the living feasted on the slain and quarreled over the bounty. But from other quarters the crawling advance pressed on.

"I have only one more flame flare," Hume stated.

One more flare—then they would be in the dark with the mist hiding the forward-moving enemy.

"I wonder if they are watching out there?" Rynch scowled into the dark.

"They—or what sent them. They know what they are doing."

"You mean they must have done this before?"

"I think so. That L-B back there—it made a good landing, and there are supplies missing from its lockers."

"Which you removed—" Rynch countered.

"No. There might have been real castaways landed here. Not that we found any trace of them. Now I can guess why—"

"But you Guild men were here, and you didn't run into this!"

"I know." Hume sounded baffled. "Not a sign then."

Rynch threw the last of his stones, heard it clink harmlessly against a rock. Hume balanced an object on the palm of his hand.

"Last flare!"

"What's that? Over there?"

Rynch had sighted the flashing out of the dark from the river bank, making a pattern of flickers which bore no relation to the infernal lights at the water's edge.

Hume's ray tube pointed skyward as he answered with a series of short bursts.

"Take cover!" The call came weirdly out over the water, the tone dehumanized. Hume cupped his mouth with one hand, shouted back:

"We're on top—no cover."

"Then flatten down—we're blasting!"

They flattened, lay almost in each other's arms, curled on that narrow space. Even through his closed eyelids

Rynch caught the flash of vivid, man-made lightning crashing first on one side of the islet and then on the other, and sweeping every crawling horror out of life, into odorous ash. The backlash of that blast must have caught the majority of the lights also. For when Rynch and Hume cautiously sat up, they saw only a handful of widely scattered and dulling globes below.

They choked, coughed, rubbed watering eyes as the fumes from the scorched rocks wreathed up about their perch.

"Flitter with life line—above you!"

That voice had come out of what should have been empty air over their heads. A gangling line trailed across their bodies, a line with a safety belt locked to it, and a second was uncoiling in a slow loop as they watched.

In unison they grabbed for those means of escape, buckled the belts about them.

"Haul away!" Hume called. The lines tightened, their bodies swung up clear of the blasted river island, as their unseen transport headed for the eastern shore.

8

A subdued but steady light all around him issued from stark gray walls. He lay on his back in an empty cell-room. And he'd better be on the move before Darfu comes to enforce a rising order with a powerful kick or one of these backhanded blows which the Salarkian used to reduce most humans to helpless obedience.

Vye blinked again. But this wasn't his cubby hole at the Starfall, his nose as well as his eyes told him that. There was no hint of uncleanliness or corruption here. He sat up stiffly, looked down at his own body in dull wonder. The only covering on his bare, brown self was a wide, scaled belt and a loin cloth. Clumsy sandals shod his feet, and his legs, up to thigh level, were striped with healing scratches and blotched with bruises.

Painfully, with mental processes as stiff as his arms and his legs, he tried to think back. Sluggishly, memory associated one picture with another.

Last night—or yesterday—Rynch Brodie had been locked in here. And "here" was one of the storage compartments of a spacer belonging to a man named Wass. It had been Wass' pilot in the flitter which snaked them from the river islet where the monsters had besieged them.

This was a concealed, fortified camp—Wass' hideout. And he was a prisoner with a very uncertain future, depending upon the will of the Veep and a man named Hume.

Hume, the Out-Hunter, had shown no surprise when Wass stood up in the lamplight to greet the rescued. "I see you have been hunting." His eyes had moved from Hume to Rynch and back again.

"Yes—but that does not matter!" the Hunter had returned impatiently.

"No? Then what does?"

"This is not a free world, I have to report that. Get my civs off planet be-

fore something happens to them!"

"I thought all safari worlds were certified as free," Wass countered.

"This one isn't. I don't know how or why. But that fact has to be reported and the civs lifted—"

"Not so fast." Wass' voice had been quiet, almost gentle. "Such a report would interest the Patrol, would it not?"

"Of course—" Hume began and then stopped abruptly.

Wass smiled. "You see—complications already. I do not wish to explain anything to the Patrol. Nor do you either, my young friend, not when you stop to think about what might result from such explanations."

"There wouldn't have been any trouble if you'd kept away from Jumala." Hume's control had returned; both voice and manner were under tight rein. "Weren't Rovald's reports explicit enough to satisfy you?"

"I have risked a great deal on this project," Wass replied. "Also, it is well from time to time for a Veep to check upon his field operatives. Men do not grow careless when personal supervision is ever in mind. And it is well that I did arrive here, is it not, Hunter? Or would you have preferred remaining on that island? Whether any of our project may be salvaged is a point we must consider. But for the moment we make no moves. No, Hume, your civs will have to take their chances for a time."

"And if there is trouble?" Hume challenged him. "A report of an alien attack will bring in the Patrol quickly enough."

"You forget Rovald," Wass corrected. "The chance that one of your civs can activate and transmit from the spacer is remote, and Rovald will see that it is impossible. You have picked up Brodie, I see."

"Yes."

"No!" What had possessed him at that moment to contradict? He had realized the folly of his outburst the moment Wass had looked at him.

"This becomes more interesting," the Veep had remarked with that deceptive gentleness. "You are Rynch Brodie, castaway from the Largo Drift, are you not? I trust that Out-Hunter Hume has made plain to you our concern with your welfare, Gentlehomo Brodie."

"I'm not Brodie." Having taken the leap into the dangerous truth he was stubborn enough to continue swimming.

"I find this enlightening indeed. If you are not Brodie—then who are you?"

That had been it. At that moment he couldn't have told Wass who he was, explain that his patchwork of memories had gaping holes.

"And you, Out-Hunter," Wass' reptilian regard had moved again to Hume, "perhaps you have an adequate explanation for this discovery."

"None of his doing," he burst out, "I remembered—"

Some inexplicable emotion made Rynch defend Hume then.

Hume laughed, and there was a reckless edge to that sound. "Yes, Wass, your techs are not as good as they pretend to be. He didn't follow the pattern of action they set for him."

"A pity. But there are always errors when one deals with the human factor. Peake!" One of the other three men moved towards them. "You will escort this young man to the spacer, see him safely stowed for the present. Yes, a pity. Now we must see just how much can be salvaged."

Then Vye had been brought into the shop, supplied with a ration container, and left to himself within this bare-walled cabin to meditate upon the folly of talking too freely. Why had he been so utterly stupid? Veeps of Wass' calibre did not swim through the murky channels of the Starfall, but their general breed had smaller but just as vicious representatives there, and he knew the man for what he was, ruthless, powerful and thorough.

A sound, slight, but easily heard in the silent vacuum of the storage cabin, alerted him. The crack of the sliding panel door opened and Vye crouched, his hand cupping the only possible weapon, the ration container. Hume edged through, shut the door behind him. He stood there, his head turned so his ear rested against the wall; obviously he was listening.

"You brain-smoothed idiot!" The Hunter's voice was a thread of whisper. "Why couldn't you have kept that swinging jaw of yours closed last night? Now listen and listen good. This is a slim try, but it's one we have to take."

"We?" Vye was startled into asking.

"Yes, we! By rights I ought to leave you right here to do the rest of your big, brave speechmaking for Wass' benefit. If I didn't need you, that's just what I would do! If it weren't for those civs—" His head snapped back, cheek to panel, he was listening again. After a long moment his whisper came once more. "I don't have time to repeat this. In about five minutes Peake'll be here with rations. I'll leave this door unlatched. There's another storage cabin across the corridor—see if you can hide there, then trick him into getting in here and lock him in. Got it?"

Vye nodded.

"Then—make for the exit port. Here." He snapped a packet loose from his belt. "This is a flare pak, you saw how they worked on the island. When you get on the ramp beyond the atom lamp, throw this. It should hit the camp force barrier. And the result ought to hold their attention. Then you head for the flitter. Understand?"

"Yes."

The flitter, yes, that was the perfect escape. With a camp force barrier on, any fugitive could only break out by going straight up.

Hume gazed at him soberly, listened once more, and then went. Vye counted a slow five before he followed. The cabin across the corridor was open, just as Hume had promised. He slipped inside, waited.

Peake was coming now, the metallic plates on his spaceboots clicking in regular pattern of sound. He earned another ration container and crooked it in his arm as he snapped up the lock bar on the other cabin.

There was an exclamation of sur-

prise. Vye went into action. His hand, backed by all the strength of his thrusting arm, thumped between Peake's shoulders, sending him staggering into the prison compartment. Before the other could recover either his balance or his wits, Vye had the panel shut, the bar locked into place.

He ran down the corridor to the well ladder, swung down its rungs with an agility born of necessity. Then he was in the air lock, getting his bearings. The flitter stood to his left, the flashing atom lamp, where the men were gathered, to his right.

Vye stepped out on the ramp. He wiped his sweating hand across his thigh. There had to be no failures in the tossing of the flare pak.

Choosing a spot, not directly in line with the lamp but near enough to dazzle the men, he hurled it with all the force he could muster. Then he was running down the ramp, forward to the area of the ship.

There was a flash—shouting—Vye curbed the impulse to look back, darted for the flitter. He jerked open the cabin compartment, scrambled into the cramped space behind the pilot's seat, leaving that free for Hume's quick entrance. More shouting—now he saw the lines of fire wavering from earth to sky along the barrier.

A black shape put on a burst of speed, was silhouetted against that flaming wall, then passed the spacer, grabbed at the open cockpit, and slid in behind the controls. Hume pulled the levers with flying fingers. They arose vertically at a pace which practically slapped Vye's stomach up into the lower regions of his throat.

The searing line of at least one blaster reached after them—too slowly, too low. He heard Hume grunt, and they again leaped higher. Then the Hunter spoke:

"Half an hour at the most—"

"The safari camp?

"Yes."

They no longer climbed. The flitter was boring forwards on a projectile flight, into the dark of the night.

"What're those?" Vye suddenly leaned forward.

Had some of the stars across the space void broken free from their fixed orbits? Flecks of light, moving in an arc, headed towards the speeding flitter.

Hume hit a button. Again they arose in a violent leap above those wandering lights. But ahead on this new level more such dots flocked, moving fast to close in on the flyer.

"A straight ram course," Hume muttered, more to himself than Vye.

Again the flyer drove forward in a rising thrust of speed. Then the smooth purr of the propulsion unit faltered, broke into protesting coughs. Hume worked over the controls, beads of sweat showing on his forehead and cheek in the gleam of the cabin light.

"Deading—deading out!"

He brought the flitter around in a wide circle, the purr smoothed out once more in a steady reassuring beat.

"Out run them!"

But Vye feared they were back again on the losing side of a struggle with the unknown alien power. As they had been herded along the river, so now they were being pushed across the sky, towards the mountains. The enemy had followed them aloft!

Some core of stubborn will in Hume would not yet allow him to admit that. Time and time again he climbed higher—always to meet climbing, twisting, spurting lines of lights which reacted on the engine of the flitter and threatened it with complete failure.

Where they were now in relation to Wass' camp or that of the safari, Vye had no idea, and he guessed that Hume could not be too certain.

Hume switched on the flitter's com unit, tried a channel search until he picked up a click of signal—the automatic reply of the safari camp. His fingertip beat out in return the danger warning, then the series of code sounds to give an edited version of what must be guarded against.

"Wass has a man in your camp. His skin is in just as much danger as the rest. He may not relay it to the Patrol, but he'll keep the force barrier up and the civs inside—anything else would be malicious neglect and a murder charge when the Guild check tape goes in. This call is on the spacer tape now and will be a part of that—he can't possibly alter such a report and he knows it. This is the best we can do now—"

"We're close to the mountains, aren't we?"

"Do you know much about this part of the country?" Vye persisted. Hume's knowledge might be their only hope.

"Flew over the range twice. Nothing to see."

"But there has to be something there."

"If there is, it didn't show up during our survey." Hume's voice was dull with fatigue.

"You're a Guild man, you've dealt with alien life forms before—"

"The Guild doesn't deal with intelligent aliens. That's X-Tee Patrol business. We don't land on any planet with unknown intelligent life forms. Why should we court trouble—couldn't run a safari in under those conditions. X-Tee certified Jumala as a wild world, our survey confirmed that."

"Someone or something landed here after you left?"

"I don't believe so. This is too well organized an action. And since we have a satellite guard in space, any ship landing would be taped and recorded. No such record appeared on the Guild screens. One small spacer—such as Wass'—could slip through by knowing procedure—just as he did. But to land all those beasts and equipment they'd need a regular transport. No—this must be native." Hume leaned forward again, flipped a switch.

A small red light answered on the central board.

"Radar warn-off," he explained.

So they wouldn't end up smeared against some cliff face anyway. Which was only small comfort amid terrifying possibilities.

Hume had taken the precaution just in time. The light blinked faster, and the speed of the flyer was checked as the automatic control triggered by the warn-off came into command. Hume's hands were still on the board, but a system of relays put safety devices into action with a speed past that which a human pilot could initiate.

They were descending and had to accept that, since the warn-off, operating for the sake of the passengers, had ruled that move best. The directive would glide the flitter to the best available landing. It was only moments before the shock gear did touch surface. Then the engine was silent.

"This is it," Hume observed.

"What do we do now?" Vye wanted to know.

"Wait—"

"Wait! For what?"

Hume consulted his planet-time watch in the light of the cabin.

"We have about an hour until dawn—if dawn arrives here at the same time it does in the plains. I don't propose to go out blindly in the dark."

Which made sense. Except that to sit here, quietly, in their cramped quarters, not knowing what might be waiting outside, was an ordeal Vye found increasingly harder to bear. Maybe Hume guessed his discomfort, maybe he was following routine procedure. But he turned, thumbed open one of the side panels in Vye's compartment, and dug out the emergency supplies.

9

They sorted the crash rations into small packs. A blanket of the water-resistant, feather-heavy Ozakian spider silk was cut into a protective covering for Vye. That piece of tailoring occupied them until the graying sky permitted them a full picture of the pocket in which the flitter had landed. The dark foliage of the mountain growth was broken here by a ledge of dark-blue stone on which the flyer rested.

To the right was a sheer drop, and a land slip had cut away the ledge itself a few feet behind the flitter. There was only a steadily narrowing path ahead, slanting upward.

"Can we take off again?" Vye hoped to be reassured that such a feat was possible.

"Look up!"

Vye backed against the cliff wall, stared up at the sky. Well above them those globes still swam in unwearied circles, commanding the air lanes.

Hume had cautiously approached the outer rim of the ledge, was using his distance glasses to scan what might lie below.

"No sign yet."

Vye knew what he meant. The globes were overhead, but the blue beasts, or any other fauna those balls might summon, had not yet appeared.

Shouldering their packs they started along the ledge. Hume had his ray tube, but Vye was weaponless, unless somewhere along their route he could pick up some defensive and offensive arm.

Stones had burst the lights of the islet, they might prove as effective against the blue beasts. He kept watch for any of the proper size and weight.

The ledge narrowed, one shoulder scraped the cliff now as they rounded a pinnacle to lose sight of the flitter. But the globes continued to hover over them.

"We are still traveling in the direction they want," Vye speculated.

Hume had gone to hands and knees to negotiate an ascent so steep he had to search for head and toe holds. When they were safely past that point they took a breather, and Vye glanced aloft again. Now the sky was empty.

"We may have arrived, or are about to do so," said Hume.

"Where?"

Hume shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. And both of us can be wrong."

The steep ascent did not quite reach the top of the cliff around the face of which the ledge curled. Instead their path now leveled off and began to widen out so that they could walk with more confidence. Then it threaded into a crevice between two towering rock walls and sloped downward.

A path unnaturally smooth, Vye thought, as if shaped to funnel wayfarers on. And they came out on the rim of a valley, a valley centered with a wood-encircled lake. They stepped from the rock of the passage onto a springy turf which gave elastically to their tread.

Vye's sandal struck a round stone. It started from its bed in the black-green vegetation, turned over so that round pits stared eyelessly up at him. He was faced by the fleshless grin of a human skull.

Hume went down on one knee, examined the ground growth, gingerly lifted the lace of vertebrae forming a spine. That ended in a crushed break which he studied briefly before he laid the bones gently back into the concealing cover of the mossy stuff.

"That was done by teeth!"

The cup of green valley had not changed, it was the same as it had been when they had emerged from the crevice. But now every clump of trees, every wind-rippled mound of brush promised cover.

Vye moistened his lips, diverted his eyes from the skull.

"Weathered," Hume said slowly, "must have been here for seasons, maybe planet years."

"A survivor from the L-B?" Yet this spot lay days of travel from that clearing back in the plains.

"How did he get here?"

"Probably the same way we would have, had we not holed up on that river island."

Driven! Perhaps the lone human on Jumala herded up into this dead-end valley by the globes or the blue beasts. "This process must have been in action for some time."

"Why?"

"I can give you two reasons." Hume studied the nearest trees narrowly. "First—for some purpose, whatever we are up against wants all interlopers

moved out of the lowlands into this section, either to imprison them, or to keep them under surveillance. Second—" He hesitated.

Vye's own imagination supplied a second reason, a revolting one he tried to deny to himself even as he put it into words:

"That broken spine—food...." Vye wanted Hume to contradict him, but the Hunter only glanced around, his expression already sufficient answer.

"Let's get out of here!" Vye was fighting down panic with every ounce of control he could summon, trying not to bolt for the crevice. But he knew he could not force himself any farther into that sinister valley.

"If we can!" Hume's words lingered direly in his ears.

Stones had smashed the globes by the river. If they still waited out there Vye was willing to try and break them with his bare hands, should escape demand such action. Hume must have agreed with those thoughts, he was already taking long strides back to the cliff entrance.

But that door was closed. Hume's foot, raised for the last step toward the crevice corridor, struck an invisible obstruction. He reeled back, clutching at Vye's shoulder.

"Something's there!"

The younger man put out his hand questingly. What his fingers flattened against was not a tight, solid surface, but rather an unseen elastic curtain which gave a little under his prodding and then drew taut again.

Together they explored by touch what they could not see. The crevice through which they had entered was now closed with a curtain they could not pierce or break. Hume tried his ray tube. They watched thin flame run up and down that invisible barrier, but not destroy it.

Hume relooped the tube. "Their trap is sprung."

"There may be another way out!" But Vye was already despondently sure there was not. Those who had rigged this trap would leave no bolt holes. But because they were human and refused to accept the inevitable without a fight, the captives set off, not down into the curve of the cup, but along its slope.

Tongues of brush and tree clumps brought about detours which forced them slowly downward. They were well away from the crevice when Hume halted, flung up a hand in silent warning. Vye listened, trying to pick up the sound which had alarmed his companion.

It was as Vye strained to catch a betraying noise that he was first conscious of what he did not hear. In the plains there had been squeaking, humming, chitterings, the vocalizing of myriad grass dwellers. Here, except for the sighing of the wind and a few insect sounds—nothing. All inhabitants bigger than a Jumalan fly might have long ago been routed out of the land.

"To the left." Hume faced about.

There was a heavy thicket there, too stoutly grown for anything to be within its shadow. Whatever moved must be

behind it.

Vye looked about him frantically for anything he could use as a weapon. Then he grabbed at the long bush knife in Hume's belt sheath. Eighteen inches of tri-fold steel gleamed wickedly, its hilt fitting neatly into his fist as he held it point up, ready.

Hume advanced on the bush in small steps, and Vye circled to his left a few paces behind. The Hunter was an expert with ray tube; that, too, was part of the necessary skill of a safari leader. But Vye could offer other help.

He shrugged out of the blanket pack he had been carrying on his back, tossed that burden ahead.

Out of cover charged a streak of red, to land on the bait. Hume blasted, was answered by a water-cat's high-pitched scream. The feline writhed out of its life in a stench of scorched fur and flesh. As Vye retrieved his clawed pack Hume stood over the dead animal.

"Odd." He reached down to grasp a still twitching foreleg, stretched the body out with a sudden jerk.

It was a giant of its species, a male, larger than any he had seen. But a second look showed him those ribs starting through mangy fur in visible hoops, the skin tight over the skull, far too tight. The water-cat had been close to death by starvation; its attack on the men probably had been sparked by sheer desperation. A starving carnivore in a land lacking the normal sounds of small birds and animal life, in a valley used as a trap.

"No way out and no food." Vye fitted one thought to another out loud.

"Yes. Pin the enemy up, let them finish off one another."

"But why?" Vye demanded.

"Least trouble that way."

"There are plenty of water-cats down on the plains. All of them couldn't be herded up here to finish each other off; it would take years—centuries."

"This one's capture may have been only incidental, or done for the purpose of keeping some type of machinery in working order," Hume replied. "I don't believe this was arranged just to dispose of water-cats."

"Suppose this was started a long time ago, and those who did it are gone, so now it goes on working without any real intelligence behind it. That could be the answer, couldn't it?"

"Some process triggers into action when a ship sets down on this portion of Jumala, maybe when one planet's under certain conditions only? Yes, that makes sense. Only why wasn't the first Patrol explorer flaming in here caught? And the survey team—we were here for months, cataloguing, mapping, not a whisper of any such trouble."

"That dead man—he's been here a long time. And when did the Largo Drift disappear?"

"Five—six years ago. But I can't give you any answers. I have none."

* * * * *

It began as a low hum, hardly to be distinguished from the distant howling of the wind. Then it slid up scale until the thin wail became an ululating scream torturing the ears, dragging out

of hiding those fears of a man confronting the unknown in the dark.

Hume tugged at Vye, drew the other by force back into the brush. Scratched, laced raw by the whip of branches, they stood in a small hollow with the drift of leaves high about their ankles. And the Hunter pulled into place the portions of growth they had dislodged in their passage into the thicket's heart. Through gaps they could see the opening where lay the body of the water-cat.

The wail was cut off short, that cessation in itself a warning. Vye's body, touching earth with knee and hand as he crouched, picked up a vibration. Whatever came towards them walked heavily.

Did the smell of death draw it now? Or had it trailed them from the closed gate? Hume's breath hissed lightly between his teeth. He was sighting the ray tube through a leaf gap.

A snuffling, heavier than a man's panting. A vast blot, which was neither clearly paw nor hand, swept aside leaves and branches on the other side of the small clearing, tearing them casually from the shrubs.

What shuffled into the open might be a cousin of the blue beasts. But where they had given only an impression of brutal menace, this was savagery incarnate. Taller than Hume, but hunched forward in its neckless outline, the thing was a monster. And over the round of the lower jaw, tusks protruded in ugly promise.

Being carnivorous and hungry, it scooped up the body of the water-cat and fed without any prolonged ceremony. Vye, remembering the crushed spine of the human skeleton, was sickened.

Done, it reared on hind feet once again, the pear-shaped head swung in their direction. Vye was half certain he had seen that tube-nose expand to test the air and scent them.

Hume pressed the button of the ray tube. That soundless spear of death struck in midsection of that barrel body. The thing howled, threw itself in a mad forward rush at their bush. Hume snapped a second blast at the head, and the fuzz covering it blackened.

Missing them by a precious foot, the creature crashed straight on through the thicket, coming to its knees, writhing in a rising chorus of howls. The men broke out of cover, raced into the open where they took refuge behind a chimney of rock half detached from the parent cliff. Down the slope the bushes were still wildly agitated.

"What was that?" Vye got out between sobbing breaths.

"Maybe a guardian, or a patrol stationed to dispose of any catch. Probably not alone, either." Hume fingered his ray tube. "And I am down to one full charge—just one."

Vye turned the knife he held around in his fingers, tried to imagine how one could face up to one of those tusked monsters with only this for a weapon. But if that thing had companions, none were coming in answer to its dying wails. And after it had been quiet for a while Hume motioned them out of hiding.

"From now on we'll keep to the open, better see trouble like that before it arrives. And I want to find a place to hole up for the night."

They trailed along the steep upper slope and in time found a place where a now dried stream had once formed a falls. The empty watercourse provided an overhang, not quite a cave, but shelter. Gathering brush and stones, they made a barricade and settled behind it to eat sparingly of their rations.

"Water—a whole lake of it down there. The worst of it is that a water supply in a dry country is just where hunters congregate. That lake's entirely walled in by woodland and provides cover for a thousand ambushes."

"We might find a way out before our water bulbs fail," Vye offered.

Hume did not answer directly. "A man can live for quite a while on very thin rations, and we have tablets from the flitter emergency supplies. But he can't live long without water. We have two bulbs. With stretching that is enough for two days—maybe three."

"We ought to get completely around the cliffs in another day."

"And if we do find a way out, which I doubt, we're still going to need water for the trek out. It's right down there waiting until our need is greater than either our fear or our cunning."

Vye moved impatiently, his blanket-clad shoulders scraping the rock at their backs. "You don't think we have a chance!"

"We aren't dead. And as long as a man is breathing, and on his feet, with all his wits in his skull, he always has a chance. I've blasted off-world with odds stacked high on the other side of the board." He flexed that plasta-flesh hand which was so nearly human and yet not by the fraction which had changed the course of his life. "I've lived on the edge of the big blackout for a long time now—after a while you can get used to anything."

"One thing I would like—to get at the one who set this trap," commented Vye.

Hume laughed with dry humor. "After me, boy, after me. But I think we might have to wait a long time for that meeting."

10

Vye crawled weakly from the area of a rock outcrop. The sun, reflected from the cliff side, was a lash of fire across his emaciated body. His swollen tongue moved a pebble back and forth in his dry mouth. He stared dimly down the slope to that beckoning platter of water open under the sun, rimmed with the deadly woodland.

What had happened? They had gone to sleep that first night under the ledge of the dried waterfall. And all of the next day was only a haze to him now. They must have moved on, though he could remember nothing, save Hume's odd behavior—dull-eyed silence while stumbling on as a brainless servio-robot, incoherent speech wherein all the words came fast, running together unintelligibly. And for himself—patches of blackout.

At some time they had come to the cave and Hume had collapsed, not rousing in answer to any of Vye's struggles to awaken him. How long they had been there Vye could not tell now. He had the fear of being left alone in this place. With water perhaps Hume could be returned to consciousness, but that was all gone.

Vye believed he could scent the lake, that every breeze up slope brought its compelling enticement. Just in case Hume might awake to a state of semi-consciousness and wander off, Vye tethered him with blanket bonds.

Vye fingered Hume's knife, which had been painstakingly lashed to a trimmed shaft of wood. Since he had emerged from that clouding of mind which still gripped the Hunter, he had done what he could to prepare for another attack from any roving beast. And he also had Hume's ray tube—its single charge to be used only in dire need.

Water! His cracked lips moved, ejected the pebble. Their four empty water bulbs were in the front of his blanket tunic, pressing against his ribs. It was now—or die, because soon he would be too weak to make the attempt at all. He darted for the first stand of bush downhill.

As the brooding silence of the valley continued, he reached the edge of the wood unhindered, intent on his mission with a concentration which shut out everything save his need and the manner of satisfying it.

He squatted in the bush, eyeing the length of woodland ahead. Then he tried the only action he had been able to think out. That beast Hume had killed had been too heavy to swing up in trees. But Vye's own weight now did not prohibit that form of travel.

With spear and ray tube firmly attached to him, Vye climbed into the first tree. A slim chance—but his only defense against a possible ambush. A wild outward swing brought him, heart-thudding, to the next set of limbs. Then he had a piece of luck, a looped vine tied together a whole group of branches from one treetop to the next.

Hand grips, balance, sometimes a walk along a branch—he threaded towards the lake. Then he came to a gap. With hands laced into tendrils, Vye hunched to look down on a beaten ribbon of gray earth—a trail well used by the evidence of its pounded surface.

That area had to be crossed on foot, but his passage through the brush below would leave traces. Only—there was no other way. Vye checked the lashings of his weapons again before leaping. Almost in the same instant his sandals hit the packed earth he was running. His palms skinned raw on rough bark as he somehow scrambled aloft once more.

No more vines, but broad limbs shooting well out. He dropped from one to another-stopped for breath—listened.

The dark gloom of the wood was broken by sunlight. He was at the final ring of trees. To get to the water he must descend again. A dead trunk extended over the water. If he could run out on that and lower the bulb, it could work.

Eerie silence. No flying things, no tree dwelling reptiles or animals, no disturbance of any water creature on the unruffled surface of the lake. Yet the sensation of life, inimical life, lurking in the depths of the wood, under the water, bore in upon him.

Vye made the light leap to the bole of the dead tree, balanced out on it over the water, moving slowly as the trunk settled a little under his weight. He hunkered down, brought out the first bulb tied fast to a blanket string.

The water of the river had been brown, opaque. But here the liquid was not so cloudy. He could see snags of dead branches below its surface.

And something else!

Down in those turgid depths he made out a straight ridge running with a trueness of line which could not be nature's unassisted product. That ridge joined another in a squared corner. He leaned over, strained his eyes to follow through the murk the farther extent of those two ridges. Looked along both pointed protuberances aimed at the surfaces of the lake, like fangs in an open jaw. Down there was something—something artificially fashioned which might be the answer to all their questions. But to venture into the lake himself—he could not do it! If he could bring the Out-Hunter to his senses the other might find the solution to this puzzle.

Vye filled his bulbs, working speedily, but still studying what he could see of the strange erection under the lake. He thought it was curiously free of silt, and its color, as far as he could distinguish, allowing for the dark hue of the water, was light gray—perhaps even white. He lowered his last bulb.

Down in the bleached forest of dead branches, well to one side of the mysterious walls, there was movement, a slow rolling of a shadow so hidden by a stirring of bottom mud that Vye could not make out its true form. But it was rising to the bulb.

Vye hated to lose a single precious drop. Once he might have the luck to make this journey unmolested, a second time the odds could be too high.

A flash—the slowly rising shadow was transformed into a whizzing spear of attack. Vye snapped the bulb out of the water just as a nightmarish, armored head arose on a whiplash of coiled, scaled neck, and a blunt nose thudded against the tree trunk with a hollow boom. Vye clung to his perch as the thing flopped back into deeper water from a froth of beaten foam, leaving a patch of odorous scum and slime to bracelet the waterlogged wood.

He ran for the shelter of the trees to get away. This time there was no rear, no thump of feet in warning. Out of the ground itself, or so it seemed to Vye's startled terror, reared one of the tusked beasts. To reach his tree and its dubious safety he had to wind past that chimera. And the creature waited with a semblance of ease for him to come to it.

Vye brought around his spear. The length of the haft might afford him a fighting chance if he could send the point home in some vulnerable spot. Yet he knew that the beasts were hard to

kill.

The mouth opened in a wide grin of menace. Vye noted a telltale tightening of shoulder muscles. It was going to rush for him now with those clawed forepaws out to rip.

To wait was to court disaster. Vye shouted, his battle cry piercing the silence of the lake and wood. He sprang, aiming the spear point at the beast's protuberant belly, and then swerved to the side as the knife bit home, raking his weapon to open a gaping wound.

The spear was jerked from Vye's hold as both those taloned paws closed on it. Then the creature pulled it free, snapped the haft in two. Vye fired a short blast from the ray tube before it could turn on him, saw fur-fuzz afire, as he ran for the tree.

Beneath its branches he looked back. The beast was pawing at the burning fur on its head, and he had perhaps a second or two. He jumped and his fingers caught on the low hanging branch, then he made a superhuman effort, was up out of the path of the thing which rushed blindly for the tree, shrieking in frenzied complaint.

The huge body crashed against the trunk with force which nearly shook Vye from his hold. As the giant forepaws belabored the wood, strove to lift the body from the ground, Vye worked his way out on another branch. In the end it was the shaking of that limb under him which aided his swing to the next tree. And from there he traveled recklessly, intent only on getting out of the woods as fast as he could.

By the noise the beast was still assaulting the tree, and Vye marveled at its vitality, for the belly wound would long ago have killed any creature he knew. Whether it could trace his flight aloft, or whether its howls would bring more of its kind, he could not guess, but every second he could gain was all important now.

At the gap over the trail he hesitated. That path ran in the direction of the open, and to go on foot meant the possibility of greater speed. Vye slipped from the bough, hit the ground, and ran. His ragged lungsful of air came in great gasps and he doubted if he could take the exertion of more tree travel now. He raced down the path.

Those mewling cries were louder, he was sure of it. Now he heard the thump of the beast's blundering pursuit behind him. But its bulk and hurts slowed it. In the open he could find cover behind a rock, use the ray again.

The trees began to thin. Vye summoned power for a last burst of speed, came out of the shadow of the wood as might a dart expelled from a needler. Before him, up slope, was the closed door of the valley. And moving in from the left was another of the blue beasts.

He could not retreat to the trees. But the newcomer was moving with the same ponderous self-confidence its fellow had shown earlier. Vye dodged right, headed for the rocks by the gap. As he pulled himself into that temporary fortification, the wounded beast dragged out of the woods below. He thought it was blind, yet some instinct

drove it after him.

Shaking from fatigue, Vye steadied his forearm on the top of the rock, brought up the ray tube. Less than two yards away now was the deceptively open mouth of the gap. If he threw himself at that, would the elasticity of the unseen curtain hurl him back into the claws of the enemy?

He fired his blast at the head of the unwounded beast. It screeched, threw out its arms, and one of those paws struck against its wounded fellow. With a cry, that one flung itself at its companion in the hunt, and they tangled in a body-to-body battle terrible in its utter ferocity. Vye edged along the cliff determined to reach the cave and Hume. And the two blue things seemed intent on finishing each other off.

The one from the wood was done, the fangs of the other ripping out its throat. Tearing viciously the victor made sure of its kill, then its seared head came up, swung about to face Vye. He guessed it was aware of his movements whether it could see or not.

But he was not prepared for the speed of its attacking lunge. Heretofore the creatures had given the impression of brute strength rather than agility. And he had been almost fatally deceived. He jumped backwards, knowing he must elude that attack, for he could not survive hand-to-hand combat with the alien thing.

There was a moment of dazed disorientation, a weird sensation of falling through unstable space in which there had never been and never would be firm footing again. He was rolling across rock—outside the curtain of the gap.

He sat up, the feeling of being adrift in unmeasurable nothingness making him sick, to watch mistily as the blue beast came to a halt. Whimpering it turned, but before it reached the level of the woods, it sagged to its knees, fell face forward and was still, a destructive machine no longer controlled by life.

Vye tried to understand what had happened. He had somehow broken through that barrier which made the valley a prison. For a moment all that mattered was his freedom. Then he looked apprehensively behind him along the road to the open, more than half expecting to see a gathering of the globes, or of the less impressive lowland beasts that acted as herders. But there was nothing.

Freedom! He dragged himself to his feet. Free to go! He slipped Hume's ray tube back into his belt. Hume was still in the valley!

Vye rubbed his shaking hands across his face. Through the barrier and free—but Hume was back there, without a weapon, defenseless against any questing beast able to nose him out. Sickly, without water and protection, he was a dead man even while he still breathed.

Keeping one hand against the wall of the gap in support, Vye started to walk, not out of the gap towards the distant lowlands, but back into the valley, forcing himself to that by his will alone and screaming inside against such suicidal folly. He put out his hand tenta-

tively when he reached the two points of rock where that curtain had hung. There was no obstruction—the barrier was down! He must get back to Hume.

Still keeping his wall hold, Vye lurched through the gate, was once more in the valley. He stood swaying, listening. But once again there was silence, not even the wind moved through trees or bushes. Placing one foot carefully before the other he went on towards Hume's cave. The haze which had clouded his thinking processes since that first morning's awakening in this bowl was gone now. Except for the physical weakness that weighted his body, he felt once more entirely alive and alert.

Wriggling in the cave's entrance was the Hunter. He had freed the bonds Vye had put on his legs, but his hands were still tied. His face, grimy, sweat-covered, was turned up to the sunlight, and his eyes were again bright with reason.

Vye found the strength to run the last few feet between them. He was fumbling with those ties about Hume's wrists as he blurted out the news. The barrier was out—they could go.

Then he was bringing one of those precious bulbs, raising it to Hume's eager mouth, squeezing a portion of its contents between the man's cracked and bleeding lips.

Somehow they made that trip back to the valley gate. When they saw their goal, Hume broke from Vye's hold, tottered forward with a cry not far removed from a sob. He rebounded to slip full length to the ground and lie there. Sobbing dryly, his gaunt face, eyes closed, turned up to the sky. The trap had snapped shut once again.

"Why—why?" Vye found he was repeating the same words over and over, his gaze blank, unfocussed, yet turned to the woods of the lake.

"Tell me what happened again."

Vye's head came around. Hume had pulled himself up so that his shoulders rested against the rock wall. His plasta-hand was out-flung, slipping up and down what seemed empty air, but which was the barrier against freedom. And now his eyes seemed entirely sane.

Slowly, hesitating between words, Vye went over the full account of his visit to the lake, his retreat before the beasts, his fortunate stumble through the gap.

"But you came back."

Vye flushed. He was not going to try to explain that. Instead he said:

"If it went away once, it can again."

Hume did not press the subject of his return. Rather he fastened upon the end of that action with the wounded beast, made Vye go through it verbally a third time.

"There is just this," he said when the other was done. "When you fell you were not thinking of the barrier at all—and your wits were working again. You had come out of the daze we both had."

Vye tried to remember, decided that the Hunter was correct. He had been trying to elude the charge of the beast, only, fear and that desperate desire had occupied his mind at that moment. But what did that signify?

To test just what he did not know, he crawled now to Hume's side, put up his own hand to the space where the plasta-flesh palm slid back and forth on nothingness. But he almost fell on his face, forward into the gap. Where he had been expecting the resistance of the unseen curtain there had been nothing at all! He turned to Hume with the expression of a man who had been stunned by an unexpected blow.

11

"It is open for you!" Hume broke the quiet first. His eyes were very bleak in his bony face.

Vye stood up, took one step and was on the other side of the curtain where Hume's hand still found substance. He came back with the same lack of hindrance. Yes, to him there was no longer a barrier. But why—why him when Hume was still a prisoner?

The Hunter raised his head so his eyes could meet Vye's with the authority of an order. "Go, get away while you can!"

Instead Vye dropped down beside the other. "Why?" he asked baldly. And then the most obvious of all answers came.

He glanced at Hume. The Hunter's head lolled back against the rock which supported him, his eyes were closed now, and he had the look of a man who had been driven to the edge of endurance and was now willing to relinquish his grip and let go.

Deliberately Vye brought up his right hand, balled his fingers into a fist. And just as deliberately he struck home, square on the point of that defenseless chin. Hume sagged, would have slipped down the surface of the rock had Vye's hands not caught in his armpits.

Since he had not the strength left to get to his feet with such a burden, Vye crawled, dragging the inert body of the Hunter with him. And this time, as he had hoped, there was no resistance at the gap. Unconscious, Hume was able to cross the barrier. Vye stretched him as comfortably flat as he could, used a portion of their water on his face until he moaned, muttered, and raised his hand feebly to his head.

Then those gray eyes opened, focussed on Vye.

"What—"

"We're both through now, both of us!" The younger man saw Hume glance around him with waking belief.

"But how—?"

"I knocked you out, that's how," Vye returned.

"Knocked me out? I crossed when I was unconscious!" Hume's voice steadied, strengthened. "Let me see!" He rolled over on his side, threw out his arm, and this time the hand found no wall. For him, too, the barrier was gone.

"Once through, you are free," he added wonderingly. "Maybe they never foresaw any escapes." He struggled up, sitting with his hands hanging loosely between his knees.

Vye turned his head, looked down the trail. The length of distance lying between them and the safari camp now faced them with a new problem. Neither

of them could make that trek on foot.

"We're out, but we aren't back—yet," Hume echoed his thought.

"I was wondering, if this door is open—" Vye began.

"The flitter!" Again Hume's mind matched his. "Yes, if those globes aren't hanging around just waiting for us to try."

"They might act only to get us here, not to keep us once we're in." That might be wishful thinking, they wouldn't know until they tried to prove it.

"Give me a hand." Hume held out his own, let Vye pull him to his feet. Weak as he was, he was clear-eyed, plainly clear-headed once more. "Let's go!"

Together they went back through the gap, then tested the absence of the barrier once more, to make sure. Hume laughed. "At least the front door remains open, even if we find the back one closed."

Vye left him sitting by that entrance while he made a quick trip to the cave to pick up the small pack of supplies left them. When he returned they crammed tablets into their mouths, drank feverishly of the lake water, and, with the stimulation of the new energy, set off along the cliff face.

"This wall in the lake," Hume asked suddenly, "you are sure it is artificial?"

"Runs too straight to be anything else, and those projections are evenly spaced. I don't see how it could be natural."

"We'll have to be sure."

Vye thought of that attacking water creature. "No diving in there," he protested. Hume smiled, a stretch of skin far too tight over his jaw now.

"Not us, at least not us now," he agreed. "But the Guild will send another survey."

"What could be the reason for all this?" Vye helped his companion over the loose debris of a cliff slide.

"Information."

"What?"

"Someone—or something—picked our brains while we were out of our heads. Or—" Hume paused suddenly, looked directly at Vye. "I have a vague feeling that you were able to keep going a lot better than I was. That so?"

"Some of the time," Vye admitted.

"That checks. Part of me knew what was going on, but was helpless while that other thing," his smile of moments earlier was wiped away, there was a chill edge in his voice, "picked over my brains, sorted out what it wanted."

Vye shook his head. "I didn't feel that way. Just thick-headed—as if I were sleep walking and yet awake."

"So it took me over, but didn't go all the way with you. Why? Another question for our list."

"Maybe—maybe Wass' techs fixed it so I couldn't be brain-picked, as you call it," Vye offered.

Hume nodded. "Could be—would well be. Come on." He pressed the pace now.

Vye turned to look down the slope suspiciously. Had Hume another warning of menace out of the wood? He could

sight no movement there. And from this distance the lake was a topaz sheet of calm which could hide anything. Hume was already several paces ahead, scrambling as if the valley monsters were again on their track.

"What's the matter?" Vye demanded, as he caught up.

"Night coming." Which was true. Then Hume added, "If we can reach the flitter before sunset, we'll have a chance to fly over the lake down there, to make a taping of it before we go."

The energy of the tablets strengthened them so that by the time they reached the crevice door they were moving with their former agility. For a single second Hume hesitated before that slit, almost as if he feared the test he must make. Then he stepped forward and this time into freedom.

They reached the ledge where the flitter perched just as they had seen it last. How long ago that had been they could not have told, but they suspected that days of haze hung in between. Vye searched the sky. No globes winking there—just the flyer alone.

He took his old seat behind the pilot, watched Hume test the relays and responses in the quick run down of a man who has done this chore many times before. But the other gave a little sigh of relief when he finished.

"She's all right, we can lift."

Again they both looked aloft, half fearing to see those malignant herders wink into being to forbid flight. But the sky was as serenely clear of even a drifting cloud as they could hope. Hume pressed a button and they arose vertically with an even progress totally unlike the leap which had taken them out of Wass' camp.

Well above the cliff wall they hovered, and were able to see below the round bowl of the valley prison. Hume touched controls, the flitter descended slowly just above the center of the lake. And from this position they were able to sight the other peculiarity of that body of water, that it was perfectly oval in shape, far too perfect to be an undeveloped product of nature. Hume took a round disk from his equipment belt, fitted it carefully into a slot on the control board and pressed the button below. Then he sent the flitter in a weaving zigzag course well above the surface of the water, so that eventually the flyer passed over every foot of its surface.

And from above, in spite of the turgid quality of the liquid, they could see what did rest on the bottom of that oval. The wall with its sharp corner which Vye had noted from shore level was only part of a water covered erection. It made a design when seen from overhead, a six-pointed star surrounding an oval and in the midst of that oval a black blot which they could not identify.

Hume brought the flitter over in one last sweep. "That's it. We have a full taping."

"What do you think it is?"

"A device set there by an intelligent being, and set a long time ago. This valley wasn't arranged over night, six months ago—or even a year ago. We'll have to let the experts tell us when and

for what reason. Now, let's head for home!"

He brought the flitter up and over the valley wall, flying southwest so that they passed over the gap which was the main entrance to the trap. And now he tried the com unit, endeavoring to pick up a signal on which they could beam in for a safe ride.

"That's odd." Under Hume's control the direction finder passed back and forth without bringing any answering code click from the mike. "We may be too far in the mountains to pick up the beam. I wonder...." He swept the needle in another direction, slightly to the left.

A crackle spat from the mike. Vye could not read code but the very fury and intensity of that sound suggested panic—even terror.

"What's that?"

Hume spoke without looking away from the control board. "Alarm."

"From the safari?"

"No. Wass." For a long second Hume sat very still, his fingers quiet. The flitter was on the automatic course, taking them out of the mountains, and Vye thought that their air speed was such they were already well removed from that sinister valley.

Hume made a slight adjustment to a dial, and the flitter banked, coming around on another course. Once more he spun the finder of the com. This time he was answered with a series of well-spaced clicks which lacked the urgency of that other call. Hume listened until the code rattled into silence again.

"They're all right at the safari camp."

"But Wass is in trouble. So what does that matter?" Vye wanted to know.

"It matters this much." Hume spoke slowly as if he must convince himself as well as Vye. "I'm the Guild man on Jumala, and the Guild man is responsible for all civs."

"You can't call him your client!"

Hume shook his head. "No, he's no client. But he's human."

It narrowed down to that when a man was on the frontier worlds—humans stood together. Vye wanted to deny it, but his own emotions, as well as the centuries of age-old tradition, argued him down. Wass was a Veep, one of the criminal parasites dabbling in human misery along more than one solar lane. But he was also human and, as one of their own species, had his claim on them.

Vye watched Hume take over the controls, felt the flitter answer another change of course, then heard the frantic yammer of the distress call as they leveled off to ride its beam in to the hidden camp.

"Automatic." Hume had turned down the volume of the receiver so that the clicks in the mike no longer were so strident. "Set on maximum and left that way."

"They had a force barrier around the camp and they knew about the globes and the watchers." Vye tried to imagine what had happened in that woods clearing.

"The barrier might have shorted. And without the flitter they would have

been pinned."

"Could have taken off in the spacer."

"Wass doesn't have the reputation of letting any project get out of his hands."

Vye remembered. "Oh—your billion credit deal."

To his surprise Hume laughed. "Seems all very far and out of orbit now, doesn't it, Lansor? Yes, our billion credit deal—but that was thought out before we knew there were more players around the table than we counted. I wonder...."

But what he wondered he did not put into words and a moment later he added over his shoulder, "Better try to get some rest, boy. We've some time to a set-down."

Vye did sleep, deeply, dreamlessly. And he roused after a gentle shaking to see a beam of light in the sky ahead, though around them was the solid darkness of night.

"That's a warning," Hume explained. "And I can't raise any reply from the camp except a repeat of the distress call. If there is anyone there now, he can't or won't answer."

Against that column of light they could make out the sky-pointed taper of the spacer and the auto-pilot landed them beside that ship in the middle of an area well lighted by the steady shaft of light from the tripod standing where the atom lamp had been on the night they had made their escape from camp.

Climbing stiffly from the small flyer they advanced with caution. A very few minutes later Hume slid his ray tube back into its belt loop.

"Unless they've holed up in the spacer—and I can't see why they'd do that—this camp's deserted. And they haven't taken any equipment with them except maybe a few items they could back-pack."

The ship proved as empty of life as the campsite. A wall seat pulled out too hastily so that it was jammed awry, the com cabin suggested that the leave-taking, when and for what reason, had been a matter of some emergency. Hume did not touch the tape set to keep on broadcasting the call for assistance.

"What now?" Vye wanted to know as they completed the search.

"The safari camp first—and a call for the Patrol."

"Look here," Vye set down the ration container he had found, was emptying it with vast satisfaction of one who had been too long on tablets, "if you beam the Patrol you'll have to talk, won't you?"

Hume went on fitting new charges into his ray tube. "The Patrol has to have a full report. There's no way of bypassing that. Yes, we'll have to give all the story. You needn't worry." He snapped closed the load chamber. "I can clear you all the way. You're the victim, remember."

"I wasn't thinking about that."

"Boy." Hume tossed the tube up in the air, caught it in his plasta-hand. "I went into this deal with my eyes wide open—why doesn't matter very much now. In fact," he stared beyond Vye out into the empty, lighted camp, "I've be-

gun to wonder about a lot of things—maybe too late. No—we'll call the Patrol and we'll do it not because it is Wass and his men out there, but because we're human and they're human, and there's a nasty set-up here which has already sucked in other humans for its own purposes."

The skeleton in the valley! And how very close they had been themselves to joining that unknown in his permanent residence.

"So now we make time—back to the safari camp. Get our message off to the Patrol and then we'll try to trace Wass and see what we can do. Jumala is off a regular route. The Patrol won't be here tomorrow at sunrise, no matter how much we wish a scouter would planet then."

Vye was quiet as he stowed in the flitter again. As Hume had said, events moved fast. A little while ago he had wanted to settle with this Out-Hunter, wring out of him not only an explanation for his being here, but claim satisfaction for the humiliation of being moved about to suit some others' purposes. Now he was willing to defeat Wass, bring in the Patrol, go up against whatever hid in that lake up there, providing Hume was not the loser. He tried to think why that was so and could not, he only knew it was the truth.

They were both silent as they took off from Wass' deserted camp, sped away over the black blot of the woodland towards the safari headquarters on the plains. There were stars above again but no globes. Just as they had won their freedom from the valley, so they moved without escort on the plains.

But the lights were there—not impinging on the flitter, or patrolling along its line of flight. No, they hung in a glowing cluster ahead when in the dawn the flitter shot away from the woods, headed for the landmark of the safari camp. A crown of lights circled over the camp site, as if those below were in a state of siege.

Hume aimed straight for them and this time the bobbing circle split wide open, broke to left and right. Vye looked below. Though the grayness of the morning was still hardly more than dusk he could not miss those humps spaced at intervals on the land, just beyond the unseen line of the force barrier. The lights above, the beasts below, the safari camp was under guard.

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"There is only one way they could be moving—toward the mountains." Hume stood in the open space among the bubble tents, facing him the four men of the camp, the three civs and Rovald. "You say it's been seven days, planet time, since I left here. They may have been five days on that trail. If possible we have to stop them before they reach that valley."

"A fantastic story." Chambriss wore the affronted expression of a man who expected no interference with his own concerns. Then catching Hume's eye he added, "Not that we doubt you, Hunter. We have the evidence in those dumb brutes waiting out there. However, by

your own story, this Wass is an outside-the-law Veep, on this planet secretly for criminal purposes. Surely there is no reason for us to risk our safety in his behalf. Are you certain he is in any danger at all? You and this young man here have, by your testimony, been into the enemies' territory and have been able to get out again."

"Through a series of fortunate chances which might never occur again." Hume was patient, too patient, Rovald seemed to think. His hand moved, he was holding a ray tube so that a simple movement of the wrist could send a crisping blast across all the rest of the party.

"I say, stop this yapping and get out there and pick up the Veep!"

"I intend to—after I call the Patrol."

Rovald's tube was now aimed directly at Hume. "No Patrol!" he ordered.

"This wrangling has gone far enough." It was Yactisi who spoke with an authority which startled them all. And as their attention swung to him, he was already in action.

Rovald cried out, the weapon spun from his fingers, fingers which were slowly reddening. Yactisi nodded with satisfaction and he held his electo pole ready for a second attack. Vye scooped up the tube which had whirled across the ground to strike against his borrowed boot.

"I'll set the call for the Patrol, then I'll try to locate Wass," Hume stated.

"Sensible procedure," Yactisi approved in his dry voice. "You believe that you are now immune to whatever force this alien installation controls?"

"It would seem so."

"Then, of course, you must go."

"Why?" Chambriss countered for the second time. "Suppose he isn't so immune after all? Suppose he gets out there and is captured again? He's our pilot—do you want to be planet bound here?

"This man is also a pilot." Starns indicated Rovald, who was nursing his numb hand.

"Since he, too, is one of these criminals, he's not to be trusted!" Chambriss shot back. "Hunter, I demand that you take us off planet at once! And it is only fair to inform you that I also intend to prefer charges against you and against the Guild. Empty world! Just how empty have we found this world?"

"But, Gentlehomo," Starns showed no signs of any emotion but eager curiosity, "to be here at this time is a privilege we could not hope to equal except by good fortune! The T-Casts will be avid for our stories."

What had that to do with the matter, puzzled Vye. But he saw Starns' reminder produce a quick change in Chambriss.

"The T-Casts," he repeated, his expression of anger smoothing away. "Yes, of course, this is, in a manner of speaking, a truly historic occasion. We are in a unique position!"

Had Yactisi smiled? That change of lip line had been so slight Vye could not call it a smile. But Starns appeared to have found the right way to handle Chambriss. And it was the same little

man who offered his services in another way when he said, diffidently to Hume:

"I have some experience with coms, Hunter. Do you wish me to send your message and take over the unit until you return? I gather," he added with a certain delicacy, "that it will not be expedient for your gearman to engage in that duty now."

So it was that Starns was installed in the com cabin of the spacer, sending out the request for Patrol aid, while Rovald was locked in the storage compartment of the same ship, pending arrival of those same authorities. As Hume sorted out supplies and Vye loaded them into the waiting flitter, Yactisi approached the Hunter.

"You have a definite plan of search?"

"Just to cast north from their camp. If they've been gone long enough to hit the foothills we may be able to sight them climbing. Otherwise, we'll go all the way up to the valley, wait for them there."

"You don't believe that they will be released after they have been—processed?"

Hume shook his head. "I don't think we would have been free, Gentlehomo, if it hadn't been for a series of fortunate accidents."

"Yes, though you didn't give us many details about that, Hunter."

Hume put down the needler he had been charging. He studied Yactisi across that weapon.

"Who are you?" His voice was soft but carried a snap.

For the first time Vye saw the tall, lean civ really smile.

"A man of many interests, Hunter—shall we let it go at that for the present? Though I assure you that Wass is not one of them in the way you might believe."

Gray eyes met brown, held so straightly. Then Hume spoke. "I believe you. But I have told you the truth."

"I have never doubted that—only the amount of it. There must be more talking later on—you understand that?"

"I never thought otherwise." Hume set the needler inside the flitter. The civ smiled again, this time including Vye in that evidence of good will before he walked away.

Hume made no comment. "That does it," he told his companion. "Still want to go?"

"If you do—and you can't do it alone." No man could take on the valley and Wass and his men.

Hume made no comment. They had rested briefly after their return to the safari camp, and Vye had been supplied with clothing from Hume's bags, so that now he wore the uniform of the Guild. He went armed, too, with the equipment belt taken from Rovald and that other's weapons, needler and tube. At least they started on their dubious rescue mission with every aid the safari camp could muster.

It was mid-afternoon when the flitter took to the air once again, scattering the hovering globes. There was no alteration in the ranks of the blue watchers waiting—for the barrier to go down, or someone in the camp to step beyond that protection?

"They're stupid," Vye said.

"Not stupid, just geared to one set of actions," Hume returned.

"Which could mean that what sends them here can't change its orders."

"Good guess. I'd say that they were governed by something akin to our tapes. No provision made for any innovations."

"So the guiding intelligence could be long gone."

"I think it has been." Hume then changed the subject sharply.

"How did you get into service at the Starfall?"

It was hard now to think back to Nahuatl—as if the Vye Lansor who had been swamper in that den of the port town was a different person altogether. In that patch of memories into which Rynch Brodie still intruded he hunted for the proper answer.

"I couldn't hold the state jobs. And once you get the habit of eating, you don't starve willingly."

"Why not the state jobs?"

"Without premium they're all low-rung tenders' places. I tried hard enough. But to sit pressing buttons when a light flashed, hour after hour—" Vye shook his head. "They said I was too erratic and gave me the shove. One more move on and it would have been compulsive conditioning. I turned port-drift instead."

"Ever thought of trying for a loan premium?"

Vye laughed shortly. "Loan premium? That's a true fantasy if you've been job hopping. None of the companies will take a chance on a man with an in and out record. Oh, I tried...." That memory arose to the surface, clear and very chilling. Yes, he had tried to break out of the net the law and custom had put around him from the day he had been made a state child. "No—it was conditioning, or port-drift."

"And you chose port-drift?"

"I was still me—as long as I stayed away from conditioning."

"Then you became Rynch Brodie in spite of your flight."

"No—well, maybe, for a while. But I'm still Vye Lansor here."

"Yes, here. And I don't think you'll have to worry about raising a premium to get a new start. You can claim victim compensation, you know."

Vye was silent, but Hume did not let him remain so.

"When the Patrol arrives, you put in your claim. I'll back you."

"You can't."

"That's where you're mistaken," Hume told him crisply. "I've already taped a full story back at the spacer—it's on record now."

Vye frowned. The Hunter seemed determined to ask for the worst the Patrol—or the planet police back on Nahuatl—could deal out. A case of illegal conditioning was about as serious as you could get.

They shot along the diagonal of the triangle made by three points, the mountain valley, Wass' camp, and the safari headquarters, heading to the slopes up which the men must be

herded if the beasts were shepherding them to the mountain valley. Vye, surveying the forest thick below, began to doubt they would ever be able to pick them up before they reached the valley gate.

Hume took a weaving course, zigzagging back and forth, while they both watched intently for a glint from one of the globes, any movement which would betray that trail. And it was on one of the upper slopes that the flitter passed over two of the blue beasts lumbering along. Neither of the creatures paid any attention to the flyer, they moved with purpose on some mission of their own.

"Maybe the tail end of the hunting pack," Hume commented.

He sent the flyer hovering over a stunted line of trees and brush. Beyond that was bare rock. But though they hung for moments, nothing moved into that open.

"Wrong scent somehow." Hume brought the flitter around. He had it on manual control now, keeping it answering to the quick changes of his will.

A longer sweep supplied the answer—a vegetation roofed slit running back into the uplands, in a way resembling the crevice through which they had originally found their way into this country. Hume brought the flyer along that. But if the men they sought were pushing their way through below they could not be sighted from the air. At last, with evening drawing in, Hume was forced to admit failure.

"Wait by the gap?" Vye asked.

"Have to now." Hume glanced about. "I'd say maybe tomorrow—midmorning before they make it that far—if they are here. We'll have plenty of time."

Time for what? To make ready for a pitched battle with Wass—or with the beasts herding him? To try in the space of hours to solve the mystery of the lake?

"Do you think we could blast that thing in the lake?" Vye asked.

"We might be able to, just might. But that must be the last resort. We want that in working order for the X-Tee men to study. No, we'd better plan to hold Wass at the gate, wait for the Patrol to come in."

Less than an hour later after a soaring approach, Hume brought the flitter down with neat skill on the top of one of the cliffs which helped to form the portal of the gap. There was no difference in the scene below, save that where the two bodies of the blue beasts had lain there were now only clean and shining bones.

Darkness spread out from the lake woods like a growing stain of evil promise as the sun fell behind the peaks. Night came earlier here than in the plains.

"Watch!" Vye had been gazing down the gap; he was the first to note that movement in the cloaking bush.

Out of the cover trotted a four-footed, antlered animal he had not seen before.

"Syken deer," Hume identified. "But why in the mountains? It's a long way from its home range."

The deer did not pause, but headed

directly for the gap and, as it neared, Vye saw that its brown coat was roughed with patches of white froth, while more dripped from the pale pink tongue protruding from its open jaws, and its shrunken sides heaved.

"Driven!" Hume picked up a stone, hurled it to strike the ground ahead of the deer.

The creature did not start, nor show any sign of seeing the rock fall. It trotted on at the same wearied pace, passed the portal rocks into the valley. Then it stood still, wedge-shaped head up, black horns displayed, while the nose flaps expanded, testing the air, until it bounded toward the lake, disappearing in the woods.

Though they shared watches during the night there were no other signs of life, nor did the deer reappear from the woods. With the mid-morning there was a sudden sound to warn them—a wild cry which must have come from a human throat. Hume tossed one of the needlers to Vye, took the other, and they scrambled down to the floor of the gap passage.

Wass did not lead his men, he came behind the reeling trio as if he had joined the blasts as driver. And while his men wavered, staggered, gave the appearance of nearly complete exhaustion, he still walked with a steady tread, in command of his wits, his fears, and the company.

As the first of the men blundered on, a fresh trickle of red running down his bruised face, Hume called:

"Wass!"

The Veep stopped short. He made no move to unsling the needler he carried, its barrel pointing skyward over his shoulder, but his round head with its upstanding comb of hair swung slightly from side to side.

"Stop—Wass—this is a trap!"

His three men kept on. Vye moved, for Peake leading that wavering group, stumbled, would have fallen had not the younger man advanced from the shadows to steady him.

"Vye!" Hume made his name a warning.

He had only time to glance around. Wass, his broad face impassive except for the eyes—those burning madman's eyes—was aiming a ray tube.

Broken free of his hold, Peake fell to the right, came up against Hume. As Vye went down he saw Wass dart forward at a speed he wouldn't have believed a driven man could summon. The Veep lunged, escaping the shot the Hunter had no time to aim, rolled, and came up with the needler Vye had dropped.

Then Hume, hampered by Peake's feeble clawing, met head on the swinging barrel of that weapon. He gave a startled grunt and smashed back against the cliff, a wave of scarlet blood streaming down the side of his head.

The momentum of Wass' charge carried him on. He collided with his men, and the last thing Vye saw, was the huddle of all four of them, flailing arms and legs, spinning on through the gate into the valley with Wass' hoarse, wordless shouting, bringing echoes from the cliffs.

13

He lay against a rock, and it was quiet again, except for a small whimpering sound which hurt, joined with the eating pain in his side. Vye turned his head, smelled burned cloth and flesh. Cautiously he tried to move, bring his hand across his body to the belt at his waist. One small part of his mind was very clear—if he could get his fingers to the packet there, and the contents of that packet to his mouth, the pain would go away, and maybe he could slip back into the darkness again.

Somehow he did it, pulled the packet out of its container pouch, worked the fingers of his one usable hand until he shredded open the end of the covering. The tablets inside, spilled out. But he had three or four of them in his grasp. Laboriously he brought his hand up, mouthed them all together, chewing their bitterness, swallowing them as best he could without water.

Water—the lake! For a moment he was back in time, feeling for the water bulbs he should be carrying. Then the incautious movement of his questing fingers brought a sudden stab of raw, red agony and he moaned.

The tablets worked. But he did not slide back into unconsciousness again as the throbbing torture became something remote and untroubling. With his good arm he braced himself against the cliff, managed to sit up.

Sun flashed on the metal barrel of a needler which lay in the trampled dust between him and another figure, still very still, with a pool of blood about the head. Vye waited for a steadying breath or two, then started the infinitely long journey of several feet which separated him from Hume.

He was panting heavily when he crawled close enough to touch the Hunter. Hume's face, cheek down in the now sodden dust, was dabbled with congealing blood. As Vye turned the hunter's head, it rolled limply. The other side was a mass of blood and dust, too thick to afford Vye any idea of how serious a hurt Hume had taken. But he was still alive.

With his good hand Vye thrust his numb and useless left one into the front of his belt. Then, awkwardly he tried to tend Hume. After a close inspection he thought that the mass of blood had come from a ragged tear in the scalp above the temple and the bone beneath had escaped damage. From Hume's own first-aid pack he crushed tablets into the other's slack mouth, hoping they would dissolve if the Hunter could not swallow. Then he relaxed against the cliff to wait—for what he could not have said.

Wass' party had gone on into the valley. When Vye turned his head to look down the slope he could see nothing of them. They must have tried to push on to the lake. The flitter was at the top of the cliff, as far out of his reach now as if it were in planetary orbit. There was only the hope that a rescue party from the safari camp might come. Hume had set the directional beam on the flyer, when he had brought her down, to serve as a beacon for the Patrol, if and when Starns was lucky enough to contact a

cruiser.

"Hmmm...." Hume's mouth moved, cracked the drying bloody mask on his lips and chin. His eyes blinked open and he lay staring up at the sky.

"Hume—" Vye was startled at the sound of his own voice, so thready and weak, and by the fact that he found it difficult to speak at all.

The other's head turned; now the eyes were on him and there was a spark of awareness in them.

"Wass?" The whisper was as strained as his own had been.

"In there." Vye's hand lifted from Hume's chest indicating the valley.

"Not good." Hume blinked again. "How bad?" His attention was not for his own hurt; his eyes searched Vye. And the latter glanced down at his side.

By some chance, perhaps because of his struggle with Peake, Wass' beam had not struck true, the main core of the bolt passing between his arm and his side, burning both. How deeply he could not tell, in fact he did not want to find out. It was enough that the tablets had banished the pain now.

"Seared a little," he said. "You've a bad cut on your head."

Hume frowned. "Can we make the flitter?"

Vye moved, then relaxed quickly into his former position. "Not now," he evaded, knowing that neither of them would be able to take that climb.

"Beam on?" Hume repeated Vye's thoughts of moments before. "Patrol coming?"

Yes, eventually the Patrol would come—but when? Hours—days? Time was their enemy now. He did not have to say any of that, they both knew.

"Needler—" Hume's head had turned in the other direction; now his hand pointed waveringly to the weapon in the dust.

"They won't be back," Vye stated the obvious. Those others had been caught in the trap, the odds on their return without aid were very high.

"Needler!" Hume repeated more firmly, and tried to sit up, falling back with a sharp intake of breath.

Vye edged around, stretched out his leg and scraped the toe of his boot into the loop of the carrying sling, drawing the weapon up to where he could get his hand on it. As he steadied it across his knee Hume spoke again:

"Watch for trouble!"

"They all went in," Vye protested.

But Hume's eyes had closed again. "Trouble—maybe...." His voice trailed off. Vye rested his hand on the stock of the needler.

"Hoooooo!"

That beast wail—as they had heard it in the valley! Somewhere from the wood. Vye brought the needler around, so that the sights pointed in that direction. There death might be hunting, but there was nothing he could do.

A scream, filled with all the agony of a man in torment, caught up on the echoes of that other cry. Vye sighted a wild waving of bushes. A figure, very small and far away, crawled into the open on hands and knees and then

crumpled into only a shadowy blot on the moss. Again the beast's cry, and a shouting!

Vye watched a second man back out of the trees, still facing whatever pursued him. He caught the glint of sun on what must be a ray tube. Leaves crisped into a black hole, curls of smoke arose along the path of that blast.

The man kept on backing, passed the inert body of his companion, glancing now and then over his shoulder at the slope up which he was making a slow but steady way. He no longer rayed the bush, but there was the crackle of a small fire outlining the ragged hole his beam had cut.

Back two strides, three. Then he turned, made a quick dash, again facing around after he had gained some yards in the open. Vye saw now it was Wass.

Another dash and an about face. But this time to confront the enemy. There were three of them, as monstrous as those Vye and Hume had fought in the same place. And one of them was wounded, swinging a charred forepaw before it, and giving voice to a wild frenzy of roars.

Wass leveled the ray tube, centered sights on the beast nearest to him. The man hammered at the firing button with the flat of his other hand, and almost paid for that second of distraction with his life, for the creature made one of those lightning swift dashes Vye had so luckily escaped. The clawed forepaw tore a strip from the shoulder of Wass' tunic, left sprouting red furrows behind. But the man had thrown the useless tube into its face, was now running for the gap.

Vye held the needler braced against his knee to fire. He saw the dart quiver in the upper arm of the beast, and it halted to pull out that sliver of dangerously poisoned metal, crumpled it into a tight twist. Vye continued to fire, never sure of his aim, but seeing those slivers go home in thick legs, in outstretched forelimbs, in wide, pendulous bellies. Then there were three blue shapes lying on the slope behind the man running straight for the gap.

Wass hit the invisible barrier full force, was hurled back, to lie gasping on the turf, but already raising himself to crawl again to the gateway he saw and could not believe was barred. Vye closed his eyes. He was very tired now—tired and sleepy—maybe the pain pills were bringing the secondary form of relief. But he could hear, just beyond, the man who beat at that unseen curtain, first in anger and fear, and then just in fear, until the fear was a lonesome crying that went on and on until even that last feeble assault on the barrier failed.

* * * * *

"We have here the tape report of Ras Hume, Out-Hunter of the Guild."

Vye watched the officer in the black and silver of the Patrol, a black and silver modified with the small, green, eye badge of X-Tee, with level and hostile gaze.

"Then you know the story." He was going to make no additions nor expla-

nations. Maybe Hume had cleared him. All right, that was all he would ask, to be free to go his way and forget about Jumala—and Ras Hume.

He had not seen the Hunter since they had both been loaded into the Patrol flitter in the gap. Wass had come out of the valley a witless, dazed creature, still under the mental influence of whoever, or whatever, had set that trap. As far as Vye knew the Veep had not yet recovered his full senses, he might never do so. And if Hume had not dictated that confession to damn himself before the Patrol, he might have escaped. They could suspect—but they would have had no proof.

"You continue to refuse to tape?" The officer favored him with one of the closed-jaw looks Vye had often seen on the face of authority.

"I have my rights."

"You have the right to claim victim compensation—a good compensation, Lansor."

Vye shrugged and then winced at a warning from the tender skin over ribs.

"I make no claim, and no tape," he repeated. And he intended to go on saying that as long as they asked him. This was the second visit in two days and he was getting a little tired of it all. Perhaps he should do as prudence dictated and demand to be returned to Nahuatl. Only his odd, unexplainable desire to at least see Hume kept him from making the request they would have to honor.

"You had better reconsider." Authority resumed.

"Rights of person—" Vye almost grinned as he recited that. For the first time in his pushed-around life he could use that particular phrase and make it stick. He thought there was a sour twist to the officer's mouth, but the other still retained his impersonal tone as he spoke into the intership com:

"He refused to make a tape."

Vye waited for the other's next move. This should mark the end of their interview. But instead the officer appeared to relax the restraint of his official manner. He brought a viv-root case from an inner pocket, offered a choice of contents to Vye, who gave an instant and suspicious refusal by shake of head. The officer selected one of the small tubes, snapped off the protecto-nib, and set it between his lips for a satisfying and lengthy pull. Then the panel of the cabin door pushed open, and Vye sat up with a jerk as Ras Hume, his head banded with a skin-core covering, entered.

The officer waved his hand at Vye with the air of one turning over a problem. "You were entirely right. And he's all yours, Hume."

Vye looked from one to the other. With Hume's tape in official hands why wasn't the Hunter under restraint? Unless, because they were aboard the Patrol cruiser, the officers didn't think a closer confinement was necessary. Yet the Hunter wasn't acting the role of prisoner very well. In fact he perched on a wall-flip seat with the ease of one completely at home, accepted the viv-root Vye had refused.

"So you won't make a tape," he asked cheerfully.

"You act as if you want me to!" Vye was so completely baffled by this odd turn of action that his voice came out almost plaintively.

"Seeing as how a great deal of time and effort went into placing you in the position where you could give us that tape, I must admit some disappointment."

"Give us?" Vye echoed.

The officer removed the viv-root from between his lips. "Tell him the whole sad story, Hume."

But Vye began to guess. Life in the Starfall, or as port-drift, either sharpened the wits or deadened them. Vye's had suffered the burnishing process. "A set-up?"

"A set-up," Hume agreed. Then he glanced at the Patrol officer a little defensively. "I might as well tell the whole truth—this didn't quite begin on the right side of the law. I had my reasons for wanting to make trouble for the Kogan estate, only not because of the credits involved." He moved his plasta-flesh hand. "When I found that L-B from the Largo Drift and saw the possibilities, did a little day dreaming—I worked out this scheme. But I'm a Guild man and as it happens, I want to stay one. So I reported to one of the Masters and told him the whole story—why I hadn't taped on the records my discovery on Jumala.

"When he passed along the news of the L-B to the Patrol, he also suggested that there might be room for fraud along the way I had thought it out. That started a chain reaction. It happened that the Patrol wanted Wass. But he was too big and slick to be caught in a case which couldn't be broken in court. They thought that here was just the bait he might snap at, and I was the one to offer it to him. He could check on me, learn that I had excellent reason to do what I said I was doing. So I went to him with my story and he liked it. We made the plan work just as I had outlined it. And he planted Rovald on me as a check. But I didn't know Yactisi was a plant, also."

The Patrol officer smiled. "Insurance," he waved the viv-root, "just insurance."

"What we didn't foresee was this complicating alien trouble. You were to be collected as the castaway, brought back to the Center and then, once Wass was firmly enmeshed, the Patrol would blow the thing wide open. Now we do have Wass, with your tape we'll have him for good, subject to complete reconditioning. But we also have an X-Tee puzzle which will keep the services busy for some time. And we would like your tape."

Vye watched Hume narrowly. "Then you're an agent?"

Hume shook his head. "No, just what I said I am, an Out-Hunter who happened to come into some knowledge that will assist in straightening out a few crooked quirks in several systems. I have no love for the Kogan clan, but to help bring down a Veep of Wass' measure does aid in reinstating one's self-esteem."

"This victim compensation—I could claim it, even though the deal was a set-up?"

"You'll have first call on Wass' assets. He has plenty invested in legitimate enterprises, though we'll probably never locate all his hidden funds. But everything we can get open title to will be impounded. Have something to do with your share?" inquired the officer.

"Yes."

Hume was smiling subtly. He was a different man from the one Vye had known on Jumala. "Premium for the Guild is one thousand credits down, two thousand for training and say another for about the best field outfit you can buy. That'll give you maybe another two or three thousand to save for your honorable retirement."

"How did you know?" Vye began and then had to laugh in spite of himself as Hume replied:

"I didn't. Good guess, eh? Well, zoom out your recorder, Commander. I think you are going to have some very free speech now." He got to his feet. "You know, the Guild has a stake in this alien discovery. We may just find that we haven't seen the last of that valley after all, recruit."

He was gone and Vye, eager to have the past done with, and the future beginning, reached for the dictation mike.

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